The SPLENDID ROAD

Vingie E. Roe

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The Splendid Road

By

Vingie E. Roe

Author of "Nameless River," etc.

NEW YORK

DUFFIELD AND COMPANY

1925

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McCall's Magazine

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Printed in U. S. A.

To

"The Days of Old, the Days of Gold, the Days of '49"

FOREWORD

September 9th, 1923.

Old Shasta, standing stark and dead on the stage-road to the Trinities, to Yreka, to the sea, a skeleton shaken free of all the life that filled it once, its hollow eyes and crumbling ribs yearning back toward the past—Old Shasta, once a roaring mining camp and called in those days after the man who first struck pick to its monstrously rich gravel, a prospector named Reading.

Old Shasta Town.

Sitting at daybreak on the rusted iron sill of an ancient brick ruin whose painted sign, "Bull Baker & Co.," is still faintly visible after almost three-quarters of a century, I look about me and endeavour to construct a vision of the past.

There is little left with which to conjure; two crumbling lines of dull brick faces, their incredibly rusted iron doors with the great, lever-worked bars for fastening, their disintegrating, windowless walls, their roofless interiors where slim locusts grow unmolested—and a ribbon of a road between.

Ah, that road!

It ran to Oregon at the north, southward to Yerba Buena on the bay—or San Francisco, as it was newly being called—and it was the great artery of the golden wilderness.

It brought the flowing stream of humanity that was to build the West. It had been sunrise for thousands, sunset for many.

It was hope that savage joy of new places which draws the pioneer. It was youth and age and lawlessness, triumph and despair—but mostly it was hope.

It lies before me now, nicely gravelled, a highway for the tourists who drive their big cars through the one long street of the dead town, gaping with wonder, shivering at the loneliness.

To me it is the Great Road, the Oregon Trail of 1852-3, the highway of romance, the path of history.

Yonder stands the building where Mr. Peter Lassen hung the first Masonic Charter, granted at St. Louis in 1847, to invade the virgin country. Farther down lies the little flat where new-come wagons camped. And there at the south lie the sunken stones, the hearths and steps of cabins, any one of which might have been the spot where Sandra Dehault lived her intrepid life.

There is still a store in Shasta, a post-office where the lone prospectors, who to this day pan the barren gulches, may get their newspapers, their bags of beans, their baker's bread.

And here I have sat on the worn porch boards

and talked with Mr. Litche, born here—whose father was here before him—and through whose kindness I was enabled to delve in the ancient books of Grim & Rambler, written in ink and a hand like copperplate, dated in 1853—to copy that amazing page of one day's gold receipts. Here I have met Mr. Hefflefinger, sheriff in the long ago, who walked about with me to this faint foundation form and that, building on their crumbling stones once more flamboyant structures—hotel, gaming-house, dance-hall and saloon.

To these two courteous gentlemen I make grateful acknowledgment.

VINGIE E. ROE

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CHAPTER I

A WOMAN OF SUSPICION

Early autumn, year of 1850, laid its warm touch upon the land. The sun, which had burned so pitilessly during months of monstrous struggle, shone softly through a mild blue haze that filled the world from edge to edge as far as eye could see.

This thin, beautiful, pale translucence had been a nine-weeks wonder. It looked like smoke, yet was not. It filled the cups of the receding hills with floods of mauve and silver shadow, and hung about the far line of the great mountain range like opal-tinted veils when the sun went down.

As the flaming orb sank lower these delicate hues deepened in tone until all the flanks of the marching peaks at the east hung draped in wine-like crimson, while towards the west itself a dusk of cold blue night crept out across the land.

Yonder somewhere lay the shores of the Pacific, marvellously present, marvellously near. A low, faint line of hills ridged the horizon, seeming to eyes long strained by distances the veritable bulwarks of the sea itself.

It was a wide country to be sure, a beautiful wide valley, level as a floor and deep with yellowed grass.

It lay as its Creator dropped it down, smiling, rich, untroubled, no scar upon it from the hand of man, no sign of his habitation.

Broad rivers ran in it between edging tule beds, and scattered here and there were oak trees of a graceful variety, their strange lace-like branches, wide-flung and abundant, drooping nearly to the ground.

Somewhere in this sweet inviting country lay Sacramento—a little farther north, a little farther west.

Captain John Lightfoot, riding with hands folded on the worn pommel of his saddle, and well in advance of his train, was conscious of all these things. His deep brown eyes under the level brim of his hat were full of happiness, and every little while a smile parted the lips in the midst of his thick beard.

He was a lean man, gracefully made and very active, of medium height and build, though his body was worn down to an iron-like quality by reason of the rigours of the crossing.

Six months he had been on the way, had had his share of the trials and hardships encountered by all wagon trains of the day, and had come safely through thus far, approximately on schedule with the time usually made.

Sacramento was right ahead, if all informa-

tion and his maps were true, and he was very glad.

After the parched monotony of the Plains in summer, the unspeakable labour of the rough country which followed them, this dreamy land was paradise. The poor cattle and poorer horses which drew the heavy wagons walked here with grateful ease, their weary heads lifting once more with a faint interest in the earth and its fullness. Here was no sand. Here were no rocks, no deep and treacherous declivities to strain the very hearts out of their bodies, but a flat and pleasant loam over whose grassy surface the rattling wheels rolled willingly.

This grass, shining in pale gold radiance for uncounted miles under the mild sun, was puzzling to these strangers, for though there had been no frost of nights to sere it, it yet seemed, and was, as dry as ashes. More than one man in the train had examined it anxiously, thinking of his stock, but the animals themselves had no misgivings. Turned into night herd they fell upon it avidly and soon proved by their condition that it was rich in sustenance.

It was cured upon the root, good as the best hay rightly handled, and was destined to carry the stock through until the miracle, astounding to all comers from the East, of the new grass which sprang among it with the November rains.

Not until this new grass was strong enough for forage would the gleaming golden stalks give

up their treasure, turning first a paler tint which rapidly changed to a mouldy black, becoming weak and falling over to melt among the vigorous new growth in the death that follows life.

So it was that, on this sweet day in early fall, John Lightfoot led his wagon train up along the Valley of the Sacramento, though he did not call it such.

As the sun sank lower towards the west he halted his tall brown horse and stood in his stirrups with arm upraised in the familiar signal which meant "Swing out—camp formation."

Marten Sprague, who drove lead team, spoke once, and his double span of matched brindled oxen stopped in their tracks.

With the precision of long practice the remainder of the twenty-seven wagons which formed the train swung out on either side alternately, spreading, carrying back, closing up into a perfect oval, each lapping close on its neighbour's tail.

When the last one had drawn in at the rear, like a cork in a bottle, the great oblong circle became instinct with life.

Drivers went to their weary stock, drawing bowkeys, lifting harness, for cattle and horses must be looked to first, while every towering-sided "schooner" sprouted women and children.

The work of camp went forward swiftly and smoothly, for every person old enough to work had his or her appointed task.

Fires were made, one fire mostly to every four

wagons, for they had formed the careful habit of conserving fuel in the treeless plains, and soon the aroma of cooking food arose upon the evening air, the voices of women called merrily across to each other, while the shrill laughter of children laced the whole with silvery music.

At Ann Lightfoot's fire a woman with a baby on her hip came up and stopped. She was a capable motherly person whose name was Branscomb, and she returned the greeting of the Captain's little blue-eyed wife with a troubled nod.

"Mis' Lightfoot," she said straightly, "I'm turrible worried about the Gephart fambly, drivin' behind us. In my 'pinion they're powerful bad, both him an' her. My son Peter's been driv'in' for 'em all day and tendin' their stock, an' I told my man I'd tell the Captain to-night."

Ann Lightfoot laid down the skillet she had picked up.

"You don't say, Mrs. Branscomb!" she ejaculated. "I knew the man was ailing, but I didn't think it was so bad as this! Where is Doctor Bidwell?"

Mrs. Branscomb waved an eloquent gaunt hand.

"He's in th' back of Jard Hasper's wagon, drunk as he's ben for three days. Them Haspers has got corn whisky with 'em."

Ann Lightfoot's small mouth hardened.

"I hope Captain Lightfoot is the last man to interfere with the liberty of anyone," she said quietly, "but I think human life comes first—

and so will he, I make no doubt. I'll speak about this directly he comes to fire. And you did right to bring this word, Mrs. Branscomb."

The gaunt woman shifted the child to the other hip.

"This is their'n," she said, "pore little scrap! It's nursin', an' can't seem to make out on a sugar-tit at all. They's two more."

She went away towards her own wagon, which was well towards the rear, and Ann Lightfoot made all haste with her supper.

It was well under way when the Captain came in across the oval between the wagons, and she stopped to watch his shapely form swinging briskly towards her with the little smile in her eyes and on her lips which sight of John Lightfoot always brought there.

From his shabby broad hat to his well-worn boots he seemed to her the very acme of perfection. Four of his children played tag a little way apart, and she was jealous of every feature of herself which appeared in them. She would have had them each a replica in miniature of their father, so well did she love him.

But, though he had ridden ahead all day, and all the days, and though she yearned to kiss him, she did not. Such open display of affection was not to be thought of. She did, however, purse her pretty lips in the round form of the caress, and he, watching covertly, smiled in understanding. It was an old play of theirs.

"Captain," said Ann quickly, "those Gepharts are both sick—and very sick. So Mrs. Branscomb has just told me. Also she told me something else. Doctor Bidwell is—is not just himself. He is in the Hasper's wagon."

The smile went from Captain Lightfoot's face at once.

"I see," he said; "I'll go there and see what can be done."

He turned and walked quickly away down the outside edge of the enclosed space, nodding here and there as he passed groups, the men washing up for supper, the women dishing up. Twice he stopped and asked some question.

As he passed a wagon well down along the line he paused and spoke pleasantly to the lone woman who knelt at her fire, one hand shielding her face from the blaze, the other holding the long handle of an iron skillet. Above the upraised hand two braids of black hair shone red in the light.

"Good evening, Miss Dehault," he said; "how is all with you?"

The woman thus addressed dropped the shielding hand, set the skillet quickly aside and rose with a swiftness and grace which showed her to be fit in every muscle, like a man. She stood across the fire and returned his greeting in a voice that lilted strangely, a sweet running trill seeming to break her words.

She was taller than Captain Lightfoot, and the

beauty of her dark face was startling, seen thus suddenly.

Her eyes shone in the light like brilliant black jewels set beneath straight black brows, and she was clad in the garments which had done so much to damn her among the women of the train, namely, a man's scarlet shirt and the strong denim skirt so short as to just conceal the tops of the boots that nearly reached her knee. She looked like a flaming signpost of evil among her drab sisters, considering the straitlaced view-point of the times, but she looked eminently well clad and capable.

Now she smiled at the Captain of the train and made him a faint suggestion of a bow.

"Very well, Captain Lightfoot," she said, "very delightfully well."

The man passed on, but every woman within hearing distance had stopped whatever task she was engaged in to listen.

It was so when any man passed word with this lone woman who drove her own team, handled it with the best driver among them, and kept her own counsel.

The very fact that she wore the best clothes of any woman, barring Ann Lightfoot, had four horses whose like was not in the caravan anywhere, and that her big wagon was new and fine, worked against her like a leaven.

"Who is she, anyway?" the whispers had demanded six months ago, when she had driven in

just so at the starting-place to join up, and had never found an answer.

If any man knew aught of her it was Captain Lightfoot, who must have been satisfied with her explanation of herself, since he had signed her in his train.

In the long months since, when she had taken her share of work and hardship like any other driver, had brought her outfit through drought, mire and swimming fords as safe as any, the whispers had redoubled with added interest but had uncovered nothing.

Her fellow-travellers knew nothing of her beyond her name—and that itself was a liability.

"Sandra!" said a bitter-faced spinster in the Craig wagon. "Sandra Dehault! If that ain't a name! 'Tain't no name—it's a curse, like Delilah or Jesobel."

"I don't know about that," said Jason Craig; "ain't yore own Lilith? An' who was she?"

His sister was silenced, but the look she gave his back was edged with venom. Jason was thirty-six and unmarried, the backbone and sinew of the Craig family, which consisted of herself and him, another sister, Manda, her do-little husband, Will Simms, and their two children.

Therefore it paid to be careful of one's speech with Jason.

But Jason Craig was not the only man who had stirred up trouble for himself among his women-

folk during those six months by speaking in admiring praise of Sandra Dehault.

Her wiry strength, her courage, her absolute assurance in the face of trial and hardship, had given her a man's place in their respect. No bitter day of doubling teams, of snaking and blocking wagons, had been too long for her, and no man had handled his stock with more care and effect than she. Also the four black horses, very large, very strong, and exceptionally quick and well trained, had done valiant duty in more than one tight place.

So, all through the train there was a quiet tendency among the men to defend her, to speak well of her, and among the women a corresponding trend of condemnation.

But to both of these conditions Sandra Dehault paid no heed. Not that she was unconscious of them. Far from it. She was as keenly attuned to every veiled attitude of hostility, every gleam of approbation in guarded eyes, as she was to the exquisite soft winds that swept the plains, the thousand changing tones of the wonderful colours of this unpeopled land.

But she did not care.

Why should she care for these small humans when the whole new world of the West lay open to her? When she had her good wagon, her horses —lean and worn to be sure like all the rest, but come safe through—her worldly goods close packed in their two hide trunks, her excellent

rifle and its box of ammunition, not to mention the belt strapped round her own slim waist beneath the flaming shirt—the belt and its contents?

When she thought of all these things her heart leaped with a joy as wild and confident as that which animated the boldest pioneer of this new land.

So she sat at her lone fire, her booted feet crossed under her, and ate her solitary meal with relish, stopping every little while, her cup arrested in her lifting hand, her lips half parted, to gaze with enchanted eyes at the shadowy spread of the level floor under the creeping blue shadow, at the distant range still faintly pink, and at the soft turquoise sky which cupped the whole.

Verily, life was good, and this woman found it so.

Meantime Captain Lightfoot stood beside the Gephart wagon, his face deeply concerned, and listened to Mrs. Branscomb's account of the unfortunate illness which had taken hold of both man and wife.

"Doc Bidwell said 'twas mountain fever when he was hyar two days back, but they took up the med'cine he left them in twenty-four hours, an' we ain't ben able since to shake enough gumption into him to git any more. They're both powerful bad, Captain."

A faint moan from the wagon confirmed this statement, and John Lightfoot turned away, walking briskly towards the Haspers' fire.

The three men around it, tall, bearded fellows from the Missouri mountains, rose at his approach.

"Where's Doctor Bidwell?" asked the leader sharply.

"Why, Cap'n, he's in th' wagon. Ain't feelin' well, I reckon. He's took frequent that-a-way."

Without a word the slender man in the worn clothes put foot to break-block and went up the tall face of the ramshackle "schooner."

This wagon had been the cause of one-third the troubles of the trip, with its loose fellies, its wobbling wheels, its weak axles.

The Captain disappeared under its cover, and in less time than it takes in the telling the limber form of Doc Bidwell came sprawling down outside, literally dumped out, head-neck-and-crop.

The other followed, and for the first and last time in their knowledge of him the people of the train saw uncovered the depths of John Lightfoot's nature.

He fell upon the drunkard and gave him the mauling of his life, his own face above the dark beard white with passion.

He called for water and doused him pitilessly, shook him with the vicious rage of a terrier attacking a mastiff, and finally stood him, two-thirds sober, against a wheel.

"Killing's too good for you, sir!" he said between clenched teeth. "You signed in this train, without goods and without price, for the express

purpose of caring for its members in sickness—false to your trust, careless and drunken, letting two people drift into the shadow of death without help! Gather your wits and go at once to the Gephart wagon. Look at your work and sober yourself fully before you fix your doses. I warn you, sir, that if you do not make the effort of your life I'll be less lenient next time. William Burson," he called, turning to the circle which had gathered, "do you go with him to see that my orders are carried out."

He thrust the reeling doctor towards the middle-aged man who stepped forward.

When they were gone the Captain turned to the three Missourians.

"I take upon myself the right to search your goods," he said sharply. "Jason Craig, and you, John Branscomb, go through these men's belongings, and if you find any liquor bring it to my wagon."

Jard Hasper leaped forward, black with instant rage.

"Not by a dam sight!" he cried; "ain't nary man goin' t' search me! Ner ter take my likker! No, sir-ree!"

John Lightfoot faced him steadily across the embered fire.

"By giving drink to the only physician in this outfit," he said, "you have jeopardized the lives of two people, therefore you are guilty of criminal carelessness, and I so brand you. You will

either give up this liquor, to be kept in my wagon until this train disbands, or you will leave the train at once, taking it with you. Is this a just judgment, men?" he asked of the silent circle.

"Aye!" said every person present, even several women joining in the verdict.

"Then, by dang!" swore Jard, "we'll git out! And stay out! An' we'll go right now!"

The two men who were searching the wagon lifted the cover and held to view several jugs.

"Put hit back!" yelled Jard. "Some damn fool's like ter get kilt fer this!"

"Put it back, men," said the Captain quietly, "we are going to lose the Hasper wagon and its contents. *Now,*" he finished with a snap, "I give you catching and hitching time."

Britt Hasper was already gone after their oxen, Jard stood with clenched hands and flaming eyes, while Holway, the youngest of the three Haspers, began gathering their gear.

In scant catching-and-hitching time the Hasper wagon rolled out of line, leaving a gap in the oval, and trailed away into the velvety, soft, black darkness which had fallen.

The spectators of the small drama went back to their own fires.

There was a lantern light shining dimly in the canvas top of the Gephart wagon, and late into the night kindly hands soothed the tossings of delirium, while Captain John Lightfoot passed back and forth at intervals, silent, troubled, sorry

and remorseful that he had not known sooner of the distressing situation, and grimly attendant on his reclaimed doctor.

At two o'clock, as near as he could tell by the stars, a form in the darkness barred his way.

"I want to tell you, Captain," said Sandra Dehault in her low voice with the sliding minors, "that a man just crawled under your outside wagon wheel—and that my hands itched to help you pound that drunkard."

Captain Lightfoot smiled.

"Thank you, Miss Dehault," he said, "for both remarks."

CHAPTER II

ALL IN THE DAY'S JOURNEY

At daybreak Hollis Gephart died, easily, without turning his head upon its pillow, as one who, sleeping, sleeps more profoundly, and three hours later Jane, his wife, ill unto death herself, succumbed to the shock.

John Lightfoot had held up his wagons. A feeling of Sabbath pervaded the peaceful camp. Children were hushed in their play and women talked in whispering groups.

The double tragedy was the first advent of death in their midst, and they had considered themselves so fortunate, since few trains got through without leaving their graves by the lonely road.

"Goes t' show," said Mrs. Branscomb grimly, "'t no man or number of 'em can set himself up agin th' Almighty. We have ben self-righteous, pridin' ourselfs on gittin' through whole. We might 'a 'knowed we was flyin' in th' face o' Providence."

"Oh, no, dear Mrs. Branscomb," said Ann Lightfoot, her blue eyes red and swollen with much weeping, "it is only the way of life. Don't lay it to our Heavenly Father. Would He not be pleased to see us rejoice because we had come

through whole? Glad that we had left none of us behind? I think so. It is life, that's all."

"H'm," said Mrs. Branscomb, shifting the youngest Gephart on her tired hip. "Well, mebby, mebby. But I swan to goodness I do' know what's to become of these pore babes. Th' oldest one's cryin' herself sick an' hangin' to th' wheel of her pore paw's wagon like a leech. Mary Sprague took her away, but she come so near goin' into spasms that she had t' let her run back agin."

Once more Ann's blue eyes filled.

"I know," she said. "It's the pitifullest thing I ever witnessed."

Time meant much to these wayworn folk, who must reach their various destinations and make ready for the coming winter; but death has its majesty and must be served.

The camp lay up all day, while unskilled but kindly hands did all that could be done for the two who lay so peacefully in their wagon among the precious belongings they would no longer need. For several hours the dread sound of hammers droned in the autumn stillness as William Burson, who was a wheelwright by trade, aided by several young men, made a simple box wide enough to hold those two who could not be separated even by death.

Half the sides from the Gephart wagon went into it, along with pieces from a number of others, and the women lined it softly with priceless quilts from their own stores.

And so the night closed down, still and starry, and there was no laughter around the fires.

John Lightfoot and his wife spoke in hushed whispers, as did their neighbours, for the awe of death was on them.

But presently, as the light from the embers died, the little blue-eyed woman crept closer to the Captain and slipped her hand in his.

"John," she whispered, "is not a contrite heart acceptable to the Lord?"

"Surely."

"And a sin repented for, is it not half atoned?"

The Captain nodded.

"Then, my dear, who are we, I ask you, who are we to condemn?"

The man looked closely at her pitiful face.

"Tell me," he said firmly, "what is it, Ann?"

Ann Lightfoot laid her cheek against her husband's shoulder and put her lips close to his ear.

"Doctor Bidwell," she whispered, "is in the clump of willows over beyond the creek, walking up and down and striking his hands together. I was over there looking for some bright leaves for a little wreath, and I saw him. I stood still and watched him, and every little while he wiped away the tears that were running down his cheeks. His soul is in travail, John dear. He is outcast and suffering. He needs that someone speak to him."

For a long time John Lightfoot sat gazing sombrely at the dull bed of coals.

Then he kissed Ann with a great tenderness and rose.

"Go to bed, little Ann," he said lowly. "I understand."

Sunrise saw the plain burial of two plain and honest folk beneath the broad boughs of one of the strange and beautiful oak trees, whose drooping branches seemed to reach down protectingly.

The Reverend Bedial Print read a grand and solemn service, and young Alice Tripnell, who had the voice of a million angels thrice refined, and would have been heard around the world had Fate not cast her for a pioneer wife and mother, sang a quaint redaction of the Twenty-Third Psalm.

And so, with the cattle waiting to be yoked, the camp fires out and all in readiness for the call "Roll Out," the sad rite was concluded.

Every person of the train was present, and it was noticeable that Captain John Lightfoot, who had so unmercifully drubbed him, stood with his arm laid on the bowed shoulders of poor Doc Bidwell, who wept openly and would not be comforted.

In the hush that followed the song, and while the earth was being laid as gently as possible, the oldest Gephart child, a fair girl of seven, tore loose from the firm hand of Mary Sprague and flung her lean little body into the half-filled grave, screaming in hysteria.

Not even to the soft weeping words of Ann Lightfoot would the little one listen, kicking and fighting like a wild-cat when any hand touched her.

It was a tragic and terrible dilemma, and more than one mother turned away in a sort of panic of grief.

Women and men tried to quiet the screaming child, and finally someone suggested that they take her out bodily; but with the first touch of force the girl nearly swooned with agony, and they stood back helplessly.

"This is awful," said Jason Craig, his face working. "Captain, what in God's name are we goin' to do?"

"Gentlemen," said a voice sweet with sliding minors, "let me try."

There was only one woman in the company who used so gracefully that word "gentlemen," and Sandra Dehault moved forward among the men.

Kneeling, she held out her arms and smiled, a brilliant smile, as if there were no such thing as sorrow in the world.

"Hester," she said clearly, "come to me—quick! Sandra'll let you cry all you want. Come, *chèrie.*"

The frightened, half-mad eyes of the child swept up to her face, and the next moment the little one was in her clasping arms, scrambling to get up to her breast. As swiftly as might be Sandra Dehault lifted the girl and carried her away

towards her own outfit, while the eyes of those assembled followed her in silence.

The men fell to their interrupted work, and as the sun rose into the mild blue vault John Lightfoot, riding out ahead, sent back the clear "Roll Out," and the train was once more under way.

Through the solemnity of the occasion sat heavily upon all hearts, there was yet room for the thin whisper of condemnation which ran among the women, good souls though they were for the most part.

"Does beat all how th' men an' children take up fer that scarlet woman!" said 'Manda Simms at noon. "You'd think she was th' Queen o' Sheeby!"

"'Tain't fitten, I say," snapped the spinster, Lilith. "'Tain't noways fitten."

The object of this judgment had little thought or care for anything beyond her present task. She sat on her high seat with the Gephart child in her lap and her four lines in her hands, and talked unceasingly.

"And so," she was saying, "though it will be a long and weary walk through life without them, little one, and many times you will cry in the night, wanting them, you must be brave as they would have you be, since they cannot be here to comfort you.

"And every night when the stars come out you

will know that somewhere on the walls of Heaven they look down upon you."

"But—but—oh!" wailed the child, "they put them in a box! My paw! My maw!"

"Only their bodies, *chèrie,*" the woman explained patiently. "Only that part which sleeps. When you sleep do you not dream sometimes?"

Hester nodded her tangled head. The tears from her small cheek smudged the pocket of the red flannel shirt.

"Well, that part of you which goes travelling in your dreams, leaving the body sleeping, that is the *soul,* little one, the part which lives and goes back to the good God when—when people die."

And so the weary stock crept on, and hour by hour they neared their journey's end, Sutter's Fort, Sacramento, American River just beyond, the land where all hoped for heart's desire, be it gold or trade or farming land.

At the noon stop Mrs. Branscomb and Ann Lightfoot came to the wagon of the Dehault woman to see how the child was doing, and found her fast asleep on the bed, made high on the top of the packed goods. Sandra, caring for her horses, finished the task before she turned to them.

"I think it is best that she sleep while she can," she said, "don't you? She is exhausted, filled with the poignant terror of seeing her parents buried. I shall fix something to feed her when she wakes. Am I right?"

"Very right, Miss Dehault," said Ann fervently, "and I want to tell you how glad I am that you took the child away. It was a miracle."

"Yes? You think so?" said Sandra gravely.

Ann nodded, but Mrs. Branscomb merely climbed the schooner's side to look at the little girl, sleeping on the big feather-bed.

"Her face ain't ben washed," she said severely.

"No," said Sandra. "I was thinking of the poor tortured little heart, glad when she forgot her woes. I don't care if she's so dirty she sticks fast. I can wash her later."

There was a high-handed, devil-may-care note in the words, and Ann Lightfoot caught it with a pleased wimple of a smile on her good little face. She reached and took the shapely brown hand that lay on the broad tire of the great wheel beside its owner.

"There's something wild in you, my dear," she said to Sandra Dehault as the bonneted head of Mrs. Branscomb disappeared under the wagon-sheet, "like a wind that doesn't care where it blows."

Sandra Dehault looked down at her with surprised pleasure.

"You're the only woman in this outfit who has read one line of me rightly," she said, "and that is perfectly true."

"That," said Ann timidly, "is why you are here —alone—going West—that wildness."

"Right again; and can you see, also, that I am as happy as that wind you speak of?"

"Oh, surely," whispered Ann, in a sudden conspiracy, for Mrs. Branscomb was coming out backwards, one gaunt leg in its heavy shoe and white cotton stocking searching for the break-block, "and you will go as far."

Sandra watched the two women walk away, and Ann Lightfoot thought to herself how slight a thing might serve to hang a friendship on—even a note of defiance in a human voice concerning a child's tear-stained face, for she knew that friendship had been made between her and this strange woman that moment.

At night Captain Lightfoot called a council to consider what should be done with the three orphans thus abruptly thrust upon the kindness of their fellow-travellers. This was a graver question than appeared upon the surface, for there was scarcely a wagon there which did not carry its own quota of children, if one excepted those several outfits belonging to unmarried men and to the spinster, Miss Dehault, and the wherewithal to feed and care for three children was something to consider.

"We'd take one of 'em," said Samuel Smith, a quiet man from Ohio, "but we couldn't do no more, seein's we've got seven of our own."

"And that is fine of you, sir," said Captain Lightfoot. "It is more than is to be expected,

with that number already to raise. No, sir; some of us who have fewer little ones should do it. I will take one—even two, if my wife is willing."

And he turned and looked down at her where she sat with her own youngest in her lap.

Ann raised adoring blue eyes to his bearded face.

"Willing," she said clearly.

"Then who will take the third?" asked John Lightfoot of the large circle, and five hands were raised.

But just then there was a movement in the far dusk beyond the fires and a tall figure in a red shirt strode through. It was Sandra Dehault, with Hester Gephart on her shoulder.

"Captain Lightfoot," she said, stopping, "may I speak on this matter?"

"Miss Dehault," said the captain courteously.

"Hester and I have been talking," said the woman so that all might hear, "and the little girl says she cannot live without her little sisters. Is it right to separate them? Think—in this great new country, with some of us going one place, some another, perhaps even to the Oregon valleys, lost to each other perhaps for ever. It seems to me, gentlemen," again the soft sliding of the minors upon the word, "that this sad remnant of the Gephart family should be held together—for the sake of the poor mother who bore them, if for no other."

She paused and looked, not at the men this

time, but at the faces of women all around the wide circle. She saw more than one mother reach out instinctively and draw her children close.

"Am I not right?" she asked and waited.

It was a long time before any answered.

Then John Lightfoot spoke uneasily:

"You are right. Perfectly and pitifully right. But who of us, coming into the new country with few goods, knowing that for the most of us there will be hard work, perhaps privation—who of us could take them all? It is too much to ask."

The woman standing in the red glow of the central fire and looking like a tongue of flame herself in her dark beauty, smiled.

"I know," she said clearly, "but I yet think the little ones, losing that priceless thing, their parents' love, should not be torn apart. And so, gentlemen, I will take them all, and do my best by them."

A sudden and profound silence hushed every small sound.

From the stream bed beyond there came the tremulous voice of a little owl and the crackling of the fire was plain.

At last there was a stir, and the thin voice of Lilith Craig carrying through though she had not meant it to.

"'Tain't fitten!" she said to her sister. "Not noways!"

John Lightfoot cleared his throat.

"It is a big undertaking, Miss Dehault," he

said, troubled, "a heavy responsibility. It means work and care—a baby to feed"—he became a bit confused as the thought of this woman's virginity came uppermost—"and—and—it means—money, too. Have you considered all these things?"

"All afternoon," said Sandra Dehault, "from every angle. I have already felt the weight of the burden on my spirit, and very frankly would like to see someone lift it; but I have not been able to get away from the main consideration—three small children whose mother and father are helpless to alter what we do to-night. My heart is that dead mother's heart this hour, and it encompasses them all."

"Fitten or no fitten," cried a woman shrilly, "I say she's right!"

"So do I, captain," spoke up Jason Craig, "an' I move every fambly here that feels like so doin' give what it can spare toward the babes' keep."

"A very good suggestion," said Captain Lightfoot, but the woman in the red shirt raised her hand, palm outward.

"I think," she said, "that I am better fixed, perhaps, than most of you, and will not need the help, though it proves the basic brotherhood of man."

She paused and smiled again.

"So, if you will give me the children and all their father's goods, I think it will be fair. I'll need a cow, for which we'll trade one of the Gep-

hart horses when we get through, and maybe we can make to trade the running gears of the wagon for something, too. This will be enough."

"Boastin'," said the bitter old maid behind 'Manda Simms, "an' graspin'!"

But the thing was finished by a vote-of-hand, and Mrs. Branscomb strode up and dumped the wailing boy into Sandra's arm with grim relief. The second child, another girl of three, was asleep in the lap of Mary Sprague, and Jason Craig lifted her.

"Have we got 'em all?" he asked Sandra, with a little smile on his lean, unhandsome face.

For the second time that day friendship leaped full panoplied to this woman's hand, and for the second time in six months she reached and took it.

"I think so," she said.

She set Hester on her feet, laid the little head of the weakling babe in her neck and walked through the silent assemblage after Jason Craig. At her wagon he lifted up the children to her one by one.

"I'll bring ye a pail of milk," he ventured, "an' in th' mornin' I'll do yer hitchin'."

For answer the woman leaned over the high side of the wagon and held out her hand. When Jason took it she gave his rough fingers such a pressure that he caught the breath on his lips and for a moment the stars, just coming out in millions on the floor of the velvet sky, ran together like a flowing stream.

CHAPTER III

ROARING LIFE

THREE days later, at sundown, the wagon train from Missouri camped beside the River of the Sacramento and on the fringes of a city. To eyes accustomed for so long to the savage loneliness of the wilderness, the town, laid out in streets and built of any material under Heaven which afforded shelter, was a metropolis.

From the spot, some half-mile to the south, which the captain had selected as a camp site, the immigrants looked upon it with bated breath and various emotions.

There were young men in the party whose fingers fairly trembled upon trace and stay-chain as they realized the nearness of their goal—the gold diggings of the West—and thought of the wide freedom about to be theirs, while many a man, beholding the broad levels of the valley itself, visioned them waving in grain, glowing deep in fruit trees.

But though a town, and such a town as this new mushroom must be, lay just beyond their camp-fires, Captain Lightfoot would have no disintegrating of his band, having settled that point by popular appeal in solemn council the night before.

This last night they would hold together in the formation which had brought them so far over such wild country and through such hardships, and on the morrow he would give up his command.

There were many families which intended stopping here, some few who held visions of the Oregon Country, fed by the exaggerated tales of those returning the year before, and yet again others who were open for any influence, meaning to let investigation direct their next step, now that they were here.

Of this class were the Branscombs, the Smiths and the Alts.

Mr. Burson, the wheelwright, was ready to open shop and ply his trade in the town beyond, having brought many of his tools with him, and having quiet confidence in himself.

Captain John Lightfoot himself was obsessed with the land. A farm with a house, and cattle and trees about his doorstep—these were the visions which rose before him in beauty. The gold fever was not in his blood. He was of the sane and ordered brotherhood who do not fly at tangents.

This last night was a very pleasant time, joyous with hope and excitement, and that sense of elation which comes from great hardships endured, obstacles all but insurmountable surmounted.

Men talked in groups all over the enclosure between the wagons, women were busy with visits here and there, making trysts together for the

future where they had formed friendships, terminating with kindly good-byes those acquaintances which had remained merely such, and everywhere there was the happiness of the goal reached, the excitement of what the near future was to hold.

There was but one woman of all the buzzing concourse who did not join in this—Sandra Dehault, who sat as usual, by her camp fire, her booted feet crossed under her, her dark eyes brooding on the little flame. She gave no sign of what was in her heart, but had there been one there who could have read the dark eyes' inhibited message he would have been astounded, for the dreams were bold as progress and they were live as fire.

She held in the cup of her lap the puny Gephart babe, while small Hester leaned adoringly against her arm, and the middle child, a chubby red-cheeked girl of three, slept frankly on the warm earth with her bright curls bedded on the tail of the short denim skirt which had found so little favour among Sandra's female contemporaries. And so Ann Lightfoot found her as she passed in her smiling and happy-hearted progress.

"Sandra," she said straightly, for she had come to first names in the quick ripening of this friendship, "are you glad that the long trip is done, that we are here?"

Sandra Dehault looked up. The up-flung light from the fire cast a red glow over her dusky skin

with indescribable beauty, and when she smiled at Ann her teeth completed the charm of the picture.

"Yes, and no," she said considering. "I am sorry the great trail is ended, left behind. We will never have such an experience again; never rise in another morning with the surge and throb of joy in the turns of the road which the day will bring; never meet such streams to ford; never listen for the Indians' whoops through another night; never sit by such darling loves of campfires."

Ann's blue eyes widened.

"How strangely you put things, Sandra," she said wonderingly, "sometimes you have the tongues of men and angels!"

"That," said Sandra with a sudden rush of impulse, "is because I love life and all its phases."

"Its what?"

"Its sides, its different presentations, all the varied things it has to offer; and because also, little Ann, there is in me the blood of cavaliers."

"Yes?" said Ann.

"Yes, the line is dead, but for me; but it held lovers most of all, and adventurers, gay blades who loved the world and gave their lives to roving. They came from France—could you not tell, looking at me?"

"I have thought so," said Ann Lightfoot, "hearing you speak and watching you with the

babies. There is impulse in you and a way to play with children——"

The woman with the starry eyes rocked her body back and forth and laughed.

"And with life—don't forget that, Ann! I can play with life!"

"And—and serve it, too, I wonder, dear Sandra?" added Ann timidly.

Instantly the other sobered.

"And serve it too, if need arise," she said gravely. "The Chevalier André Loissen d'Azun de Hault——"

What it was the Chevalier de Hault had done in those far off days, or who he was, Ann was not to hear, for a sound of arrival interrupted the speaker.

There were horsemen coming from the direction of the distant town, and Captain Lightfoot drew out to the somewhat more open apex of the oval enclosure to meet them, taking with him Marten Sprague, William Burson and such of the older men as stood handy. Gaunt and worn in their travel-stained garments, they were fit type of the men who were arriving every month in California, those sturdy pioneers who dared all and feared nothing.

Some ten or twelve riders were approaching at a rolling canter. As they drew up and stopped at speaking distance the foremost raised his broad hat and bowed to Captain Lightfoot.

"Welcome, sirs!" he said in a voice whose tones

seemed strung on an habitual thread of laughter. "We heard you were coming and have been on the look out for you since noon."

"So?" said John Lightfoot, smiling. "That is pleasant hearing to us, strangers in your land."

"Not our land—yours—others'—everybody's," said the new-comer, "the biggest land that ever lay out of doors, and crying for settlers. This is California."

"And how did you know to expect us to-day?"

"A lone wagon drove in last night—the Haspers', I believe they are, and said you were close behind."

"Ah!" said Captain Lightfoot, and the other continued.

"I am sent by Mayor Richards to meet you and to say that if there is anything wherein he or his officers can help you, you are to feel free to ask; any information we can give, any courtesy we can extend is granted and extended beforehand."

Captain Lightfoot went forward with extended hand.

"This greeting warms my heart," he said simply. "Mr——?"

"Halliday," said the other, dismounting quickly and taking the outstretched hand, "Stanton Halliday, nephew to Mayor Richards."

"Mr. Halliday, I, and all, thank you heartily, and through you the Mayor and the town."

Introductions followed, other men of the train joined the party, and presently there was a sort of

impromptu reception inside the oval, where a huge fire was quickly built and the visitors seated in a wide ring, where they were the centre of interest.

Many questions were asked and answered on both sides, the residents desiring news of the crossing—always a topic of interest in those days—and the town-hungry travellers eager to hear of the life of the city on the river's lip.

And each side had news to give—of drought and floods and Indian attack—of rushing life, of gambling for unheard-of stakes, of fortunes made and lost over-night, of gold and its wild fever.

Every man, woman and child of the train ringed the circle, the youngest discreetly in the farther shadows, but none the less at one with the point of the moment, and history was in the making, for it was just such hours as this that filled the great reaches of the virgin country with its inheritors.

Stanton Halliday was an engaging speaker, and as he sat on the ground with his booted knees clasped in his arms and his fair head bare in the red light of the fire, he was well worth the attention he commanded. Lean, tall, straight as an Indian, of some twenty-seven or eight, he seemed to exemplify the life he described, to breathe of its taut energy, its readiness for anything, its daring and its devil-may-care.

He told them of the rapid growth of Sacramento town, of its merchantry, its gaming houses, its

politics and somewhat of its society—this last with his grey eyes on the fire but with his inner sense catering to the silent background of the women—those women who, he knew, had seen neither flounced silk nor buckled slipper for all those hard months of the trail.

They listened avidly to his description of the first great ball which had been held at the "Blue Drilling" hotel the year before, and of the new styles brought in regularly by the *Senator* on her trips up from San Francisco.

He then passed quickly to the topic of navigation, which was of vital interest to all men of the country; but one woman, standing on the far outside of the circle and swinging gently back and forth to soothe the fretful child in her arms, smiled in pleased understanding of the subtle kindliness which thought to feed, for that brief moment, the hungry hearts of the Hagars.

"Who is the stranger, did you hear, Ann?" she whispered. "He has a mouth fit for kisses, firm-lipped and yet curling upward at the corners. Could you not kiss him with ease, Ann?"

Ann Lightfoot gasped and blushed in the darkness. Such bold speech from a woman was almost indecent. "His name is Halliday," she said primly, "Mr. Stanton Halliday, and he is nephew to the mayor of the town beyond."

Sandra Dehault glanced sidewise at her friend, her face alive with humour, but Ann's blue eyes were fixed severely upon the scene.

Next day Captain Lightfoot became John Lightfoot, and the camp capitulated to the town. Many wagons drew into the outskirts and made permanent camp while their owners plunged into the tide of roaring life to find what best it offered.

In two days William Burson had pitched his tent and set up shop with his hands full to overflowing of work, while the three Alt men, who were blacksmiths and willing to work at the trade, had aprons on before sundown of the first day.

Work was crying to be done and few wanted to do it. All were rushing hither and yonder in the mad stream of speculation, leaving for the diggings daily, coming in from them with pockets weighted with the raw metal, spending, drinking, scheming, welcoming a future that seemed the very tip and pinnacle of prodigality.

The beginning of this group of immigrants in the new country was like the beginning of every other; they would work until they caught the fever, then away for the rough mining camps, the hills and the gulches. But just now they were bewildered, getting their bearings.

Family after family caught the contagion and stopped at Sacramento.

On the second day after the arrival of the Lightfoot train three wagons pulled down into the streets of the town and halted.

The foremost, drawn by four good black horses, seemed in excellent trim after its long journey, and on its high seat rode a woman. She wore no

sun-bonnet on her sleek black head where the wound braids glistened, and her red flannel shirt lay open at the throat. Man's boots, very greatly worn, but showing evidence of one-time splendour in the matter of last and leather, not to mention a tracery of scarlet stitching, rested frankly on the dash, and she handled her lines like an expert.

Behind her came Jason Craig and the Reverend Bedial Print.

These three, falling together by Heaven alone knew what law of the farther places, were going on. But Sandra Dehault could no more have passed through the metropolis without tasting of its flavour than she could have refrained from breathing. Therefore she must needs halt and, climbing down, and taking the second child on her arm, go striding down the teeming street, her gay dark eyes missing nothing.

She passed saloons in rickety shacks, gaming places wide open to the day where men leaned across tables and slapped down dirty cards to the tune of a dollar an ante, and presently paused before an imposing pine structure, every square foot of whose raw lumber had cost one dollar.

Here there were counters where bolts of cloth were piled in stacks and such merchandise as appealed to women lay out for inspection. Leaning in the doorway she surveyed the interior with its motley of goods and buyers, women in wide calico skirts jostling men in flannel shirts with rough trousers tucked into their boots, and whiskered

to a man. Then she went boldly in, and setting the child on the counter began to select this print and that, drilling and good flannels. It was a keen delight, the handling of these simple fabrics, after the long months of man's work, man's privations, and she picked and chose with eagerness.

The children would all need garments for the coming winter. She bought threads and needles and four cards of small bone buttons. It was a good hour later when she finally drew a sigh of satisfaction and bade the clerk count up her purchases.

As he bent over his pen and paper Sandra turned and watched the people, her little leather purse clasped in her hand. It held forty dollars, coin of the realm, or its equivalent in paper, and she felt very well pleased with herself and the world in general. Already she was seeing the smallest Gephart in the gay pink calico.

"One hundred and sixty-seven dollars, madam," said the clerk.

She heard him speak but, not thinking it concerned her, did not turn. The clerk repeated his statement.

Slowly she turned and looked at him.

"Eh?" she said.

"Your bill is one hundred and sixty-seven dollars," he repeated apologetically.

Sandra's quick wits finally grasped the appalling truth. This man was asking her one hundred and sixty-seven dollars for a bill of goods for

which she had expected to pay not more than twenty-five! A red flush flew up into her face.

The dark eyes began to sparkle bodingly.

"Young man," she said sharply, "I am new come to this place, but I am not so simple as you seem to think me. Also I have no time for levity. Tell me my bill at once."

"But, madam, I have," said the man distressedly.

It was hard work crossing this flaming beauty who so evidently had a will and a mind of her own.

"I will see the owner," said Sandra stiffly, "if you please."

So the clerk went away and came back with a portly individual whose small black eyes twinkled spiritedly from between deep rolls of flesh, and a very heated argument took place, for Sandra Dehault was outraged. That is, it was heated on her side. The owner of the store had dealt with strangers from the other side of the continent before. So he was pacific and smiling, and bowed a great deal while assuring her that the clerk was right, much as it was to be regretted. In the midst of his suave explanation the girl picked up her child and was for going out of the store in anger, and then she thought suddenly of the little ones' needs, and that if this store dared charge such rates, the rest would do likewise. So her sanity conquered her anger and she turned back.

"Very well," she said, "I bought and I will pay,

if you will give me time to go back to my wagon and return. I have not so much money with me——"

"Beg pardon, lady," said a thick voice at her elbow. "Lady in dishtresh. Never pass Buck Lockwell. Rescue beauty alwaysh—an' beauty thish time, no mishtake. I'll pay bill. 'Low me."

With a grand flourish a heavy figure lurched against her in passing and flung a dirty leather bag upon the counter. It fell with a sound of unexpected weight and a few small, dull, yellow pebbles rolled from its open mouth. A thrill like a shock shot through the girl.

Gold!

It was her first sight of the stuff for which men had gone mad half round the world, which had brought her and her associates across the plains, which was drawing its thin threads of devotees from every corner of the world, which brought ships around the Horn.

In her astonishment she forgot the entire issue of the calicoes and bent eagerly forward to look at these bits of yellow magic. But when, presently, the storekeeper reached for the bag and began to pour its contents into his palm, while the clerk brought a little set of scales, she remembered and whirled to look at the hiccuping stranger. He was swaying on his toes, booted and belted, his pale eyes bleared with drink, his loose mouth leering in his beard. He waved a hand grandiloquently.

"Weigh out," he told the merchant. "Weigh heavy. Buck Lockwell paysh f'r hish frien's."

Sandra looked at him contemptuously. Then she hunched the child higher on her arm.

"Not this time, mister," she said, "though I thank you."

"G'wan!" he said, "wha's pinch gol' dust? One—two—kishes—all square. Dam purty woman, you know thash?"

Sandra was growing pale. A little crowd had gathered.

"If you don't take this drunken beast away from me," she told the proprietor, "I'll smash him—or you. Begin."

But the keeper only smiled, spreading his hands. Who was this passing immigrant that he should offend Buck Lockwell? The lothario laughed uproariously and waved again. Then he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and staggered forward.

Quick as thought the girl slid the child to the counter and shot out a hard brown fist. It caught Lockwell on the right cheek and sent him backward in a running arc, all but falling.

As he brought up, scowling in a swift fury of the drunkard, against the ring of interested onlookers, a figure pushed through to the small clear space by the counter.

"Bickford," it rasped, "since when have you run an emporium for bulldozing women? I heard the most of this and you'd better step lively. Al-

low *me,* miss, to pay this bill and to take you to your wagon, where you can settle with me at your better convenience. Will you do so?"

"Most certainly, sir," said Sandra Dehault, upon the instant picking up the wailing Gephart, "with deep gratitude."

And she stood by complacently while this man paid for her and picked up her roll of merchandise.

Under her lashes her dark eyes were taking him in delightedly, her anger lost, her embarrassment forgotten, for this stern-lipped champion with the steady grey eyes under the tilted hat-brim was none other than that laughing-voiced emissary from the town who had sat by John Lightfoot's fire and welcomed the strangers to California, "the biggest land that ever lay out of doors."

Together they walked out of the pine store and turned back up the street in the direction of the wagons.

"Sir Galahad!" said Sandra in a low voice where the minors slid delectably. "Do you always arrive at the magic moment?"

Stanton Halliday laughed.

"Not always," he said, "and from all indications I was not so badly needed as I might have been. That was a sockdolager you gave Buck Lockwell, if ever I saw one! Where do you get your strength and quickness?"

"From the good God in the first place," said

the girl frankly. "I've always been strong. In the work of the crossing for the second. I've brought my own outfit through."

There was a note of high pride in the last words.

The man turned and took a good look at her.

"Then you are the first woman to do so, I believe," he said admiringly.

At the wagon the youngest Gephart was crying weakly and the Craigs and Prints were waiting impatiently. The incidents of the store had taken longer than she had reckoned, and Sandra was conscience-smitten.

Halliday put the large bundle of goods inside, while Sandra, retiring under cover for a moment, brought out the precious money.

"You are not stopping?" he asked in surprise of the girl as she dropped back to the ground.

"No; I am going on."

"But this is the heart of the country! Where are you bound for?"

"For Reading's Flat," said Sandra. "I have been bound for there since I started. I hear it is not so far now."

"No; only about two hundred miles—a little over, maybe."

Sandra held out her hand.

The long black eyes were laughing, the red lips curved like scimitars around the fine white teeth.

"I want to thank you, Galahad," she said softly, "and—and I want to kiss you—for good-bye."

If she had handed him a blow like the one that

settled Lockwell, Halliday could not have looked more astonished. He closed the lips he had opened to speak, and the grey eyes studied her face. A small shadow seemed to pass across his features, as if regret hovered there a moment. Then he laughed suddenly and drew her to him by the hand he held.

"I'm like Buck," he said lightly, in an altered tone. "I never pass a lady in distress. If I'm the only one to kiss you good-bye, I'll do my best."

The girl came to him readily and put an arm about his neck. In the middle of the teeming street, before the scandalized eyes of the Craigs and the Prints, she laid the warm red flower of her mouth against his cheek.

"No," the man said sharply, "that's not a kiss —do it right."

But in a second she was loose from his detaining arm and going up the schooner's side. From the high seat she looked down at him and all her face was flushed adorably.

"Give me the little one," she said, "and always remember that I was pleased with you."

In a sudden grave silence Halliday swung the child up to her.

As she gathered her lines he stepped back and raised his hat.

"I wish you luck, Mrs.——?" he said.

"*Miss,*" said Sandra. "I am not married."

The leaders leaned in their worn collars, the wheelers followed, the great wagon creaked to its start.

Stanton Halliday leaped with it.

"Your name?" he cried. "Tell me!"

But the woman shook her head, hauling the child up beside her.

"Quick! Tell me your name, girl!"

"Only a woman, mister," she said primly yet with a sparkle, "with the soul of a long dead cavalier—a lover of life and the brave hearts one sometimes meets in the far reaches of this grand world. Adieu."

And the wagon was under full way. As it rattled down the street she leaned out and called to him, with the noon sun on her shining head.

"Already I regret that it was the cheek, *monsieur!*"

As the three wagons drew into the sunset late that day, Sandra Dehault, in the lead by a wordless consent of all concerned, smiled dreamily at the landscape in its blue and golden haze.

"He'll pass a thousand women in that town," she thought, "but he will not forget—because it *was* the cheek."

Then she set about the business of night camp, knowing full well that from now on she was pariah, that she had damned herself with her companions beyond all redemption.

She had no thought of any, being chiefly concerned with how the cow, for which John Lightfoot had made the proposed trade, had stood the day's travel and whether or not its milk was to agree with the baby, who, by the way, had willingly accepted a bottle and a crude rag nipple.

CHAPTER IV

THE GOLDEN LILY

Into that same wide sunset, with its marvellous colours of pearl and amethyst and fairy wine, a gallant ship was streaming. She was trim and staunch as any ship might be, and she was ocean-worthy. She had come round the Horn the fall before and now plied regularly up the Sacramento river to the wild town on its lip.

She carried freight and passengers on a magnificent scale, for she was of seven hundred and fifty tons and drew nine and a half feet of water, being none other than the *Senator*.

Her proud forefoot cut the slow waters of the stream and the smoke from her funnels spread like a plume against the sky. On her decks a motley assemblage watched the low shores of the great valley of the Sacramento flow by. There were men in all walks of life, doctors, lawyers, merchants, men of intellect and attainment. There were gamblers and crooks and ne'er-do-wells, drifters and adventurers. Men were many. They were everywhere. Women were a different matter, being few and far between, and wherever a broad skirt and its fringe of laced or ruffled pantalet was to be seen, there masculine eyes turned—ac-

cording to their owners—enviously, hungrily, timidly, boldly.

And centre of this lively interest was a group of three, a man and two women. They sat in small chairs near the rail and gazed at the passing wilderness with the calm of a composure that was perfect. The man was middle-aged, iron grey and portly, with severe side-whiskers that blocked his face into a sternness which his fine brown eyes belied. Fit complement to him was the matronly woman in the mulberry merino dress, with its endless yards of tiny pleating and its huge draped protuberance behind. She wore no hoops, but the prodigious width of skirt that followed at her heels covered their loss entirely. Also her hat was small and tipped well over her face, of an elegance noticeable at first glance, while the mitts that covered her hands to the second joint of the fingers were of a fine black lace.

The other, the third member of this small and self-sufficient party—how shall one describe her?

She was small and very slender, with the thin, soft lines of youth, had one been able to see them. They did show adorably for the short space of neck and shoulder beneath the poke-bonnet and above the widely gathered sleeve, and once again for a fleeting moment in the prim little waist. Then the great ballooning skirt took full charge of them and bade one mind his business.

Even the tiny slipper with its crossed bands

seemed jealous of its precious possession, keeping well back from sight.

But in the nape of the milk-white neck two little rings of hair slipped slyly down to curl in the tight, soft cylinders which nature bestows upon her favourites, and they were yellow as ripe maize. Also beneath the bonnet's bending rim there was visible the curve of an adorable chin, a small red under lip.

The great new West saw few girls like this.

Fathers who owned such left them, for the most part, safe at home. Every observer on the *Senator* that splendid fall evening knew her for the pink of young feminine perfection, sheltered, educated, guarded from even ordinary knowledge of life, the pride of her parents' hearts. Charm radiated from her as she sat so primly in her little chair, her mitted, small hands folded decorously in her lap, her narrow back straight as a lance, and her broad skirt of heavy delaine arranged in graceful billows like a half-closed flower.

"My dears," said the portly man, "I'm afraid it's going to be too dark to see much of the town when we arrive. The night is falling fast, and we yet have two hours' steaming, so the captain tells me."

"What does it matter, Mr. Grey?" replied his wife in pleasant tones. "This hour is sufficient unto itself. I think that we shall never see another like it. We saw nothing on the ocean to match the beauty of this new country in its marvellous

light—neither moonshine, nor dawn, nor storm. I am charmed beyond expression with the thought of the life that awaits us here."

Mr. Grey did not reply to that, but he looked long into the depths of the smiling eyes upturned to his, and there was a smile upon his own face.

The daughter did not join in the low-voiced conversation which followed, but sat very still, with her hidden face turned to the moving shores. They were level shores, not very high, and green with willows and other trees. One knew that level land swept back and away from them.

The wondrous pageant of the coloured twilight drew to a close.

The sun dropped beneath the rim of the world and very soon the rose and lavender and turquoise faded into cold steel and then to black, and the night was come. A little cold wind drew up the surface of the river and passengers began to put on coats, to seek the boat's saloon.

Mr. Grey went to make some last arrangement pertaining to the coming disembarkation, and the two women remained beside the rail. The flaring bonnet was tilted forward now as the younger watched the stars that were beginning to twinkle back from the dark water.

"Mother," she said presently in a low voice, "I feel very strange to-night."

"Strange?" said Mrs. Grey surprisedly. "Why Lilian? Are you not happy in the thought of the new country we are entering—the land we

have heard so much about—the golden California?"

The girl nodded.

"Happy, yes," she replied; "so happy that it hurts way down inside my heart somewhere; but also there is another feeling, a feeling as if—as if life looms big in the future; I can't explain it—as if, somehow, great happiness and great sorrow are waiting for us. I glow—inside me—and shiver too."

The mother reached out and took the small hand in hers.

"Dear child," she said comfortingly, "these are the vagaries of youth, the inevitable reactions of the young soul to realities and potential romance. But I fear that Miss Fortesque was not as careful of your reading this last year at school as she should have been. However, have no fear of life, my darling. It is the most splendid of all the Almighty's works and should be faced with a glad heart. These forebodings are quite natural and——"

The rest of her words were lost in the prolonged deep thunder of the steamer's foghorn, which cut into the stillness of the night, and the rustle of passengers tramping forward towards the bow.

"Yan she be!" cried a stentorian voice from a bearded throat. "Th' lights o' fortin', boys! That's Sacerment or I'm a liar! Give 'er a yell, men; she's wuth it! Come on!"

Instantly every man within sound of the voice

took up its cry, and the steamer rocked with the noise of the cheering.

True enough, far ahead and to the right several points of fire sparkled against the darkness—flambeaux at the landing.

Wild excitement prevailed. Faces were flushed, fingers clenched and opened, hands trembled, for the lure of gold took fresh and savage hold upon these men who had come half around the world to find their fortunes.

They stood and stared at the lights ahead, fascinated, each obsessed with his particular dream, and presently the grand old boat, pride of her time and place, cleaved up to her rough wharf and the great journey was done.

As she slid alongside the strains of a brass band broke on the air, making up in vigour and volume what it lacked in harmony, and there was seen to be a crowd assembled, for the arrival of the *Senator* up from San Francisco was always an event pregnant with expectation. Many were the meetings that took place on that small wharf, the element of surprise was always present.

As the passengers streamed down the gangplank, every eye searching the mass of faces below, there was seen to be a small group of gentlemen standing together and a bit in advance of the rest. Mayor Franklin Richards and several friends. The mayor was a fine figure of a man, tall and lean and square-built, with an iron jaw and a steel grey eye which there was no deceiving.

That eye was upon the descending stream, and presently it lighted with a gleam of pleasure as he stepped forward slightly.

"Mr. Grey!" he called clearly. "John Grey, old friend!" and flung up a hand with his high hat in it.

Mr. John Grey was deeply burdened with the paraphernalia of travel, but he managed to catch and return the greeting to which he had looked forward for many months. And presently he was wringing the mayor's hand, and saying over and over again how happy he was, and asking after Mrs. Richards, and that it had been four years; and, yes, it was a grand trip round the Horn; and that here were his wife and his daughter Lilian, and would he have known the child? and so on. And so they moved out through the mass to where the carriages waited, talking, acknowledging introductions, filled with the joy of meeting.

Another torch flared in the slow night wind, and in its light a man was running, looking back across his shoulder towards the open street which flanked the embarcadero. As he neared the spreading concourse of the boat's arrivals there came three spurts of flame from the darkness, three bolts of sound, and the man ran on unscathed; but at Lilian Grey's very side a huge bulk of flesh toppled forward with a grunt, fell sprawling, its bundles flying wide.

"Hell!" it screamed in a high keen wail. "An'

I yelled fer Sacerment—an'—her—lights o' fortin'!"

For one second there was the stillness of shock. Then Mayor Richards and two of his friends leaped to the fallen man and raised him. Mr. Grey stood frozen to the spot, Mrs. Grey covered her face with her hands and for once forgot her daughter. The girl, nurtured like a hot-house plant, opened her pale mouth to scream and could not. She swung helplessly to the right, struggled back to equilibrium, wavered a moment and went on over to the left, one hand groping blindly.

As she fell a man swung forward with reaching arms and caught her. The slim girl-form was a featherweight, and he lifted it as one would lift a child, the little head in its loosened bonnet falling frankly down across his right arm, the modest slippered feet in the billowing skirts dangling meekly over his left.

Stanton Halliday, hurrying to join his uncle's party, had been just in the nick of time. As he raised his burden the light from the torch fell full upon the upturned face and showed it the fairest thing the new town of Sacramento had ever held.

In the turmoil of excitement a towering figure bent over Halliday's shoulder to look at it in wonder.

"By all that's holy," said Buck Lockwell, entirely sober and capable of judging, "what a day

it's been for women! The Red Rose was sure handsome, but this—why, this——''

The bold voice softened, dropped to a reverent whisper.

''This is a Golden Lily straight from th' gardens of God!''

Halliday whirled to scowl at him, but the renegade did not even see him. He was talking to himself, flung back to some forgotten manhood by the sight of a girl's unconscious face.

CHAPTER V

THE LIGHTS O' FORTUNE

Gold! Gold! Gold!

It was the colour of this new commonwealth. The very flowers that starred the slopes in summer were yellow as the sun, the sands of the rivers were pale as maze.

Men swarmed in droves where it lay shallowest, drunk with its promise of plenty. And that promise was true—literally, prodigally true.

In every smallest stream, in every gulch where snow-waters ran, on the breast of every hill it lay close to the surface, the dull, rich, heavy stuff that could buy and rule the world.

On every bar the rockers swung, at every pebbly bank men squatted with the round flat-pans from whose flaring lip the swirling sands were washed to leave its insolent weight of wealth.

Free gold everywhere, the raw, rough lumps, little and big, and everywhere the roystering, excited crews to take it.

Hands full of it—bags full of it—cans full of it—it was the blood of the country, the soul of the time.

And it was a wild-eyed wanton, making men mad who were erstwhile sane, stilling the voice

of conscience in many, while to others it gave stark dreams of empire.

It bought women and sold men, spread out for all observers the hidden passions of humanity, and forgot God entirely.

That last was no anomaly.

In the Stinking Tent on J street, on a night a few weeks after the foregoing events, a man sat dealing faro.

He was tall and slim and very grave, with deep eyes half hidden in hollow caverns, and the long white hands that moved so constantly on the cards before him had once gripped the edges of a pulpit. There was a hint of the clerical about him still in the plain black coat with its square-cut tails and double-breasted fastening, and in the sensitive lips which were set in a too-straight line above the well-built chin.

In the crowded surging mass of men that filled the tent to overflowing, spilled its surplus out upon the open way and surged full again, he sat like a rock in a tide-rip, unmoving and unmoved, attending to his business strictly. On every hand poker was running full blast, relieved by Mexican monte, and gold flowed back and forth across the dirty tables.

Not coin. Few men had that. But gold, raw gold, solid and heavy, clinking in its rawhide sacks. They wagered and won, or lost, with whoops of laughter, great stakes, for these who played were of that hardy stripe who had come

to the west coast before the gold Hegira, or had brought with them sufficient to tide them over to prosperity. Not every man who came to the diggings realized his hectic dream of Midas wealth, though it lay so near for the taking. Many landed in the gold fields worn to the *nth* degree with hardship and had nothing left for outfitting at the ruinous prices asked. These grasped eagerly at common labour for the time being, but nothing hindered their looking on while others flung gold to the four winds.

And so it was a motley crowd that played and passed in the Stinking Tent on the mild fall night in question.

At ten o'clock three miners, new to the town, but bearded and brown as any there, came lurching in. Two of the three were drunk and loose of tongue with the excitement of their first real taste of gold. They carried each the magic leather bag of the time and place, and they had come to gamble. They spoke with a soft Missouri drawl, but the light in their pale hazel eyes was flighty and uncertain, quick to flare and as quick to die. The two younger sat in at a poker game, but the third passed on to where the lean clerical person dealt his expert faro.

Here he stopped, sober and cold, and watched the swift play with a glowing light upon his hawk-like face.

"I swan!" he said admiringly to no one in par-

ticular, since he knew none in the heated, sweating mass about him, "I do swan to golly! Ef that ain't playin'! Hit shore is!"

And he elbowed in a trifle closer.

There was silence about the faro table. A ring of men circled it. Their hands held gold in all forms—nuggets, dust, quartz, even, so rich with yellow metal that it crumbled at a touch, and some few minted pieces.

They watched the dealer's long white hands hovering over the box, the cards as they slid out, the monotonous movements of the case-keeper's buttons. They played their choices to win or lose with high-handed devil-may-care, and both winnings and losses were enormous. It was straight faro, straightly dealt, and was the most exciting thing in existence in this maelström of excitement that was the river town. It had its surging stream of devotees which passed before it like pilgrims to a shrine, leaving the work of months, taking the burgeoning, unbelievable future—for men were paid off at that table so heavily that, had they gone from the town, the country, the coast itself, they would have been rich for life.

But they did not go.

They stayed to play and play again, and the owner of the Stinking Tent became rich instead. So rich that he did not know the extent of his wealth in solid pounds.

And so the man with the flighty eyes stood by the table's rim and watched, while the heart in

his lean body thundered on his ribs. His long hands opened and closed, fingering spasmodically the little bag of "dust" that stood for his first few weeks' work in the new "diggin's." Ignorant, bigoted, filled with an exaggerated pride which he had brought with him from the Missouri hills, and which was bred in all his "hilly-billy" clan, Jard Hasper watched this wild playing, and itched with its lure.

The three Haspers had come with less than any wagon in the train. They had been born in poverty and shiftlessness. They hated work for its own sake, and would have given it a wide berth had it been possible. They were not fools in a certain sense, and saw in the beginning that in this land one must work or starve, since one could not steal. Only the week before a man had shot another at the foot of I street and had gone scot-free; but two others had been hanged on the embarcadero without the formality of a trial, since two shirts and a revolver, taken from a canvas hut, had been found in their possession.

So now Jard watched the gold flowing in and out across the faro layout and his loose lips drooled with excitement.

"I golly!" he murmured again, pushing closer still.

He pulled the strings of his new sack, and taking out a handful of the precious small bits, bought a stack of chips and laid them on the king of spades to win. He leaned forward eagerly. The

dealer shifted his thin pasteboards—the buttons clicked—and the king won.

Jard slapped his thigh.

"Let 'er ride!" he cried.

Again he won.

Trebled, he left his bet to win, and it did so.

With a whoop he shoved his counters together and bet once more.

Up to the third bet no man had noticed him or his small doings. Others were doing so much more that he was insignificant.

But with his cry attention swung to him, and held.

For he won again for the fourth time, straight, and that electric sense which makes static such masses of tense men, such times and places, told all the corners of the Tent that a "run of luck" was present.

And it was so.

The long hands of the dealer began pushing stacks of chips towards Jard with monotonous regularity, while the look-out perched on his high stool leaned forward in sudden interest.

Men began to gather about the table in a dense mass, fighting for a chance to play the winner's hunch, shoving their bets through between arms and heads and shoulders.

Jard, excited until his pale eyes were black as night, stuck to his unreasoning course of "letting her ride."

Mr. Gee, owner of the Tent, attracted by the fly-

ing news, came and stood close by the dealer's side.

"What's th' limit?" demanded a red-faced Hercules in a dirty flannel shirt, pulling the strings of his "poke."

"Ain't none," said Mr. Gee briefly. He was known as a dead game sport and the best loser in the country.

The silence became strained until men could hear distinctly the beating of each others' hearts. Monotonously the dealer turned his cards—and the luck held.

Held miraculously. With every turn Jard Hasper's bet doubled itself, like the rolling up of interest upon interest, and he was becoming a rich man in a matter of sweating moments.

It was well for him that the box was well nigh run when he laid down his first small bet. Otherwise what happened could not, in reason, have happened. But it did happen, and the clerical dealer turned his last card in the greenhorn's favour, the case-keeper cried "Right!" as he closed his check-rack, the deal was done—and the crowd breathed.

Jard Hasper was whimpering, biting his nails. He swung back and forth on his heels and toes exactly like a drunken man. The excitement had charged his shallow eyes with a mad expression.

"Playin'!" he reiterated idiotically. "I golly! I stuck 'er out—never lost onct! 'At's playin'—

an' I done hit! Yes, sir, I done hit—done myself proud!"

Still muttering, still rocking on his feet, he stretched out shaking hands for the great heaps of gold which Mr. Gee was having weighed out on the table in a little pair of scales brought for the purpose.

Jard had nothing about him in which to carry it, and the owner of the Stinking Tent sent a man to bring a goodly canvas bag into which he scooped with his two hands the precious stuff. He tied it carefully with a yellow cigar ribbon and, smiling and bowing, presented it to Jard, who took it without a word.

As the dealer turned his attention to paying off the rest who had played Jard's run, the winner began pushing his way out through the crowd, hugging his bag.

A miner laughed.

"Th' tenderfoot's scared," he said, "scared plumb t' death fer fear someone's goin' t' rob him!"

As the three Haspers swarmed into the street Jard's flaring eyes lighted for a moment on the quiet face of John Lightfoot who had stood within a yard of him.

"Huh!" he cried. "Cap'n Lightfoot! Put us outen his train because we was pore! Chased me from under his wagon! We ain't pore now—not by a damn sight!"

And he surged out into the night.

After him, as if drawn by a magnet, went a man, a slim man whose thin face had suddenly become starvation-peaked.

John Lightfoot took a quick step and dropped a hand on this man's shoulder.

"Doc," he said sharply, "hold yourself, sir! Hold hard," and fell into step beside him.

Doc Bidwell raised a shaking hand and wiped his face.

"I wish you'd let me go, captain," he said hoarsely. "There isn't a drop of anything in all this flowing land with the light and fire of the old Missouri brand. My throat's parching for it—and Jard's got it."

"Yes," said the other abruptly, "and if you go now it's got you. Seven weeks, doc, and you've been straight as a die. You've saved the lives of three people with your skill, done something on the credit side of your books of life. And besides, Ann Lightfoot's been praying for you every night at bedtime. Do you want her to doubt that mighty power?"

The man beside him groaned audibly. He shoved his hands hard down in his pockets, shook his shoulders.

"I know that you and your wife with your indescribable goodness are making life so hard for me that I'd rather be dead!" he said bitterly.

"But you won't a year later, doc," returned the other earnestly. "These are the shadows, but after darkness comes light. You can come

through. You've come through seven weeks. Don't let go your grip now—for the sake of Ann's prayers, if for nothing else. And think of your skill, the precious skill so sorely needed in this new country. You owe humanity its service. Will you come home and sleep at our tent to-night?"

With no answer Doc Bidwell swung after him as he turned east along the river.

CHAPTER VI

THE GREAT ROAD

It was sunset, autumn sunset in the great valley of the Sacramento, when the three wagons which were the last of John Lightfoot's train, pulled into their destination. They had come over country flat as one's palm with the dim hills showing at the east and west, and every day had been bland as content, beautiful as youth.

The clear light of the early mornings had invariably given place to the soft grey smokiness of afternoon, the marvellous pageantry of sundown when the purple and rose and amethyst painted the world in splendour.

Never could Sandra Dehault get enough of this miracle of light and colour. She would ride for the magic hour when the spectacle was beginning, hunched forward on her seat, her lines hanging loose in her calloused hands, her red mouth frankly open and her long eyes drowsy with delight.

Woe to the three small nuisances if they disturbed her then. She had roundly spanked the second girl, Constance, for the first offense, and Hester had turned her wise little mind to the task of preventing a recurrence.

And so it was that, in a gorgeous twilight of

purple and crimson, there drove into the one long street of Reading's Flat a woman of destiny, whose motives men were to question, whose standards they were to misjudge, and for whose favour they were to fight like challenging bucks.

She straightened on her high seat, flipped taut her lines, and went down the little dip that brought the road from the low hills to the town. There was a flush upon her face, a light in her eyes, for this was the "end for which the first was made," the good reward for all the months of hardship, the peak and pinnacle and goal—"*the diggin's!*"

Before her lay a little narrow valley, a sweet and smiling spot between the rough red hills that rimmed it, and it was shining with a thousand lights, for all its space was covered with clustering habitations. Tents and shacks were crowded on the short skirts of the hills on either side, unroofed camps were everywhere, and the one long street was lined with buildings, even to the far end of the tiny glade.

On the high ridge at the left several lumber houses were proudly perched, looking down disdainfully on their humbler fellows, for they had come round the Horn. There was noise that filled the valley, laughter and voices calling, and sound of axes on hollow wood, with here and there the brawling bray of pack mules turned out to graze. Man was here in the abstract.

Everything was elemental. There was no restraint. There was no order.

The whole world of this great new land was free, free for the taking, and he who was the strongest got his pick.

So it appeared to this woman who surveyed it with the joy of adventure running high in her heart.

Everything was here for the taking, land and gold and life and love, and she had come to take of it all as truly as any bearded pioneer yonder in the sparkling camp.

With an eye as quick as light, a judgment admirable in its swift comprehension, she swung her leaders out to the right where there was open space to spare, and the great schooner with its swaying top went careering down across the little flat to its final night camp.

The Craigs and the Prints swung down, and the crossing was done.

They unslung their gear, made their fires, turned out their stock, and were one with the West.

Sandra Dehault unhooked her horses with trembling hands. The heart in her breast was thundering. The lure was dragging at her with a million siren hands.

For once she was deaf to the puling cry of the puny babe in the wagon, and brushed aside with unconscious impatience small Connie's imploring hands.

The dead cavalier was holding back the cur-

tains of her soul, peering out once more on Romance and Adventure.

She did not hear Jason Craig come up, nor his low-voiced greeting. He spoke again before she drew a hand across her face and looked at him. There were dreams in her eyes then and boasts and promises and sly withholdings, so that the very sight of her stirred this common man to unwonted depths. The blood poured up under his dark skin and he stood regarding her, forgetting what he had come to say.

"Jason," said Sandra suddenly, "from this day forth I'm as good a man as any here. I'm going to wear pants."

"Good God!" he gasped. "Miss Dehault, don't do that! What will folks say about you?"

"Say about me? Do you think for one minute I care what folks say about me? I've got work to do, man's work, and a family to keep. I can do it best in pants."

"But—but—no woman ever done the like! Not a—a——"

"*Decent* woman, you mean?"

Jason nodded.

"Well?"

With a sudden flare of daring he reached and gripped her wrist.

"Don't tell me you're not such," he said savagely. "I can't a-bear it."

Sandra's softly smiling face had become hard.

"What do you think, yourself?" she asked. "What do you think about me?"

"I wish to God I knew!" he groaned. "That day in th' street at Sacerment'—th' man you—you——"

"Yes? The man—I—kissed? Just so. I have kissed men before, Jason. I'd kiss you if I had as good reason. And remember this, my friend—I have no one to answer to. I am as I am, beholden to none. Did you want to speak to me particularly?"

"No," said Jason humbly, "only to say that, if you need me in ary way, ary way at all, I'm ready an' willin' to do for you."

With an impulsive step the girl came to him and took both his hands in hers. The tenderness in her long eyes was an unconscious foil to its own purpose.

"I know," she said gently, "and I shall call upon you many times, I clearly see. You are our friend, mine and the little ones'. But you must expect to pay if I do, Jason, pay to your soured sisters and to Preacher Print. And it will be sacrifice, sacrifice to friendship pure and simple, for I cannot repay you."

How truly her frank prophecy was to be fulfilled only the dim future knew. But the man went away comforted and the woman set about caring for her babes with the meticulous thoroughness which their tender years demanded.

Her camp was orderly, compact, simple. She

took from the wagon only the scantiest gear that would serve her purpose, and yet she got for herself and hers the acme of comfort. And when the stars came out on the clear blue vault of the sky she sat as usual by her embered fire with the wee one in her lap, Connie curled on her spread skirt's edge, and Hester drowsing on her shoulder. Of all the vivid and varied pictures which the roaring mining camp displayed that night, and they were uncounted, this was the most beautiful.

So beautiful was it with the red glow shining upward on her dusky face and picking out the spot of her scarlet shirt that men, passing on every hand, looked and looked again.

There were women here, of course. Where there are men there will ever be women—of a sort. And the sisterhood of Reading's Flat was mostly—of a sort. There were beautiful women, too, some still gay with youth, some feigning youth, and more far gone from its elysian fields, but before three hours had passed on that mild fall night a word was running in the gambling shacks that there was a woman camped on the edge of town whose like was not in California.

In the Rough and Ready gambling hall a slim youth of twenty was talking excitedly, laughter rippling in his words and lights shining in his brown eyes. He wore a hat set side-wise on his head, a belt laced tight in front, red "sleeve-hysters" on his blue-flannel-clad arms, and the

rest of his raiment was in keeping with his swagger. His slender face bore a soft brown beard.

"Spirit of my great aunt Jane," he said, "she's a red rose an' a dark night—with stars—an' a south wind all rolled into one! Her forehead's wide—an' there's two braids of hair—black hair—crossed above it, and her eyebrows are level. She's got long hands with straight fingers. Man alive! What a faro dealer she'd make! She's got——"

"Seems to me you must of took a pretty fair survey, Texas," said a bystander, "seein's how this here woman's only *ben* here about two hours, near as I kin figger from that I ben a-hearin'."

"I did. An' so will you when you see her—also an' notwithstanding, so will every man-jack in this here camp. She'll play ducks an' drakes with Reading's Flat, or I'm a liar!"

A man, walking slowly among the tables and layouts, stopped at the last of the boy's words.

He was a big man, big of bone and padded heavily with flesh and muscle. He was dressed in what passed in Reading's Flat for the height of fashion. His coat was long and cut square about the knees, and its rolled lapels flared wide to show the flowered waistcoat beneath, the boiled shirt and black string tie.

Hand-made boots with gay stitched tops confining the trousers at the knee completed his costume, save for the broad hat with its low crown and the white kerchief tucked into a breast pocket.

His face was clean-shaven but for the long moustache which outlined his narrow, full-lipped mouth, and the eyes above the high-bridged nose were very dark and very quick and keen.

He looked at Texas Tom steadily, listening.

As the boy continued his fatuous, laughing eulogy the keen eyes came up in tone if such a phrase might describe what took place in them, and he stepped over to the group at the bar.

"Ain't no use, Mr. Clehollis," said the narrator, "she ain't yore kind."

The big man did not speak. He wiped his smooth, white hand across the bar, and the bartender behind became busy with his cloths. Clehollis, looking critically at his palm, and finding it satisfactorily clean, turned his cigar between his teeth.

He leaned an elbow on the polished wood and hung the fine hand down across its edge.

"What you say sounds interesting, Tex," he said in a deep voice that carried surprisingly under the noise of the place—the slap of cards, the rattle of roulette, the clink of glasses and the duller clink of gold, the shouts of men, their laughter, their heavy breathing—"it sounds interesting—but disappointing. Also, may I ask, why the distinction?"

"Eh?"

"Why do you dash my instant hopes with your last statement?"

"Because it's facts. She ain't."

"No?"

"No. Look at Daisy Dean over yon, an' Angel Allie an' Satan's Sister. They're yore's, ain't they?"

Clehollis nodded gravely.

"Guess so," he said. "But the 'Rough and Ready' could use ten more girls if we had them. And Angel's not so bad to look at—nor the other two."

The sharp eyes softened as they searched the teeming room.

"They're the darlings of two hundred miles each way, Texas. I take it hard that you slight them. Do for a fact. Now *why* isn't this new beauty—my kind?"

The boy sobered.

"Because she's got three babies curled around her knees out yon beside her camp-fire," he said.

Clehollis smiled.

"That's too bad," he said resignedly, "with women so darned scarce. What's her husband like?"

"She ain't got none. I asked that question of th' long-faced parson that come in with her, an' his wife answered so damn quick an' hard that I didn't need to ask no more. She ain't friends with that ol' cat, I'll stake dust."

It was significant of the time and place that every man in the group pricked up his ears at that.

"Is she alone?" Clehollis asked, his interest instantly quickened.

"I worked fast," said the boy naïvely, "but I couldn't find out nothin' more. You'd ort to appreciate the news I did bring."

"We do," said the gambler gravely; "we sure do, Tex, and we'll find out the rest for ourselves."

"That's right!" cried a miner, "an' there ain't no time like th' present. I'm goin' instanter an' have a look fer myself at Tex's Cistern Madonner."

And he swung himself out towards the door.

Like a fire in grass his intent caught on. The three men nearest turned after him, others fell into their wake, and before the words were cold on his bearded lips this bold pioneer of curiosity had a mob behind him of those who, standing close enough, had caught the conversation.

Swinging from the bar, Dan Clehollis watched them go. It was beneath his dignity to follow. All he wanted came to him sooner or later, had ever come. Sometimes of its own free will, sometimes under the lash of his purpose, sometimes broken and pleading. But come it always did. If this newcome woman with her inflaming beauty was to be one of his possessions, all well and good. He could wait the word of others.

Therefore he threaded the packed jam of humanity in the Rough and Ready, taking in everything, missing nothing.

The small dark eyes saw the steady movements of a faro dealer's hands and knew they were feeling for the "sand tell," hovered for a moment on

the man at the roulette wheel, went on to another playing draw poker, and rested at last with a flare of satisfaction on a girl who stood leaning against the rough wall, her small arms folded on her delicate breast. She was undersized, slight and graceful, like an outdoor child, and her short face was sweet as a child's and almost as innocent in appearance under its fair hair so meekly parted.

But this was Angel Allie, as wise and hard and deeply dyed a dance-hall woman as the West could show.

And in every fibre of her, heart, soul and body, she belonged to the man who stopped beside her and laid his white hand on her shoulder. At his touch she drew a long breath like a sigh, and the blue eyes she turned up to him were beautiful as the dawn. It was significant of her wisdom, however, that she changed no whit of her expression, one of pleased interest in the brilliant scene, nor moved a hair's breadth on her slippered feet. Her absolute poise had been always a matter of admiring wonder to Clehollis, for he had seen her in some tense situations in two years he had known her, and always she had dominated them.

So now he stood beside her and watched the working of his establishment in that wordless understanding which obtains between rare friends.

"What's Texas Tom talkin' so loud about, Dan?" the girl queried idly. "He looks all lit up inside—or did before he went out."

The gambler smiled.

"A woman," he said, "a super-woman, from all I can make out. A woman who came in with the wagons camped on the south flat, and who seems to have set the boy mad. He's singing psalms for all to hear."

Angel Allie did not move from her admirable poise, but the bits of hands clasped on her folded arms tightened their grip as if a spring had snapped them. After an appreciable pause her blue eyes flickered upwards to sweep Clehollis' face.

Out on the little open flat beyond the town Sandra Dehault, dreaming her wild dreams, looked up from the gay heart of her fire, for a string of men, like the tail of a kite come down to earth, was winding solemnly towards her. They were bearded and rough from hard labour and harder living, and the very swing of their progress denoted that spirit which cared for naught but the excitement of the moment—neither man or woman or God.

They were led by the adventurous miner, but every face behind him was avid with the woman-hunger of that pre-eminently man's country. Not a man in the string but had instant visions, instant hopes.

And yet, when they had come close to her, seated quietly at her fire, a shyness took them one and all, and for an embarrassing moment they looked at her in utter silence.

Inside her the woman felt a surge of wildness,

of excitement, of high-flown ecstasy. What it was she could not have said, for it was not occasioned by any specimen of manly beauty in the bold group before her, nor of desire to single out any one of them. Rather it was a prescience of things to come, a forerunner.

"Already it begins to pass," she said to herself exultantly, "to pass on its great road—the West and all it offers. And I shall pick and choose!"

"Well?" she said aloud.

The word was small and soft, a slight thing to carry all the freight of inflection which this master-artist gave it.

It sounded like a question and demand in one, and also like a plea for faith and help and understanding, and was somehow instinct with dignity. There was warning in it, too, and shades of subtle things which went far over the heads of these men who had come roistering out to look over the new woman, and it meant more to her than to them. It was Sandra Dehault's first challenge to the new life.

One small word!

She spoke it and was still, looking at them across her dying fire, with deep eyes in which leaped flames.

"Well?" she said again, and the inflections had changed as if by magic.

There was nothing soft in the small word now, nothing asking.

It was alert, hard, sparkling, a command and an ending.

And it was effective, utterly and instantly, for the roistering string turned with its leader and went marching back across the flat—and it had not spoken one word!

When the last of the boots and flannel shirts had disappeared among the lights below, this woman rocked with silent laughter, and rousing her sleeping babes, put them to bed in the wagon.

"I swan," said Lilith Craig venomously, "th' Jezebel calls fer men right smart early!"

"Woman," said Jason, rising from where he lay with his lean face in his elbow, "ef I hear such again I'll take measures to you."

CHAPTER VII

THE NEW LAND TAKES ITS OWN

Dawn was a miracle. It cleared the pale mists from the valley between the ridges and painted the western slope in a flood of light the actual colour of a new-blown rose. Against its marvellous effulgence the burning lights of the all-night camp stood out like pale stars.

Sandra Dehault stood beside her wagon and looked at it all in great joy. The babe was whimpering, and from the wagons of her erstwhile fellow-travellers came the sounds of early rising.

And there was stirring activity in the street beyond.

Groups of men were busy here and there at various tasks, doors were open to the eastern light, and from the fringes of the hills' skirts drivers of the pack-trains were bringing in their mules. Lean, hard-looking Mexican mules these were, worked to the last degree of iron muscle, and scarred on back and belly with the cinch-marks of *aparajos*. There were several hundred of them, for Reading's Flat was the clearing-house, as it were, for the camps beyond—Weaverville over in the Trinities, Yreka on beyond—and they were wise almost as their masters. So wise that each

one singled out his own heap of outfit saddle and blanket, and stood beside it.

The narrow street was already teeming with its daily life, though that of the night was hardly done. Swarms of men moiled at the business of getting out to the gulches that came down from the mountains on all sides like horns of plenty, spilling their largesse of gold into the valley.

Middle Creek, Rock Creek, Salt Creek, they all lay cradled in the hills' arms, their names soon to be famous wherever men spoke of gold from the southern line to the Oregon country on the north. And at the south lay Gamblers' Gulch, as wildly romantic a spot as the imagination of man could devise.

All this the woman saw with sparkling eyes and laid claim to for the future—the town, the life, the country, and—*the gold.*

For Sandra Dehault was burning with its fever as truly as any adventurer there, had been since its first wild whisper had reached her on the other side the plains.

When the great red sun came up above the pine-clad ridge she ceased her dreaming and made practical use of the beautiful hour. She dressed and fed her infants and sent Hester to ask Jason Craig to come to her.

"Jason," she said straightly, "here is money. Will you go into the town and buy me those pants? Get them to fit you," she looked him over swiftly "and I'll make them fit me."

Jason took the money which she handed him and turned away without a word. It went against his grain to see this woman fly in the face of life as she seemed bent on doing, but he had promised to "do for her."

And whatever she asked seemed to him the law.

In the Rough and Ready gambling hall Dan Clehollis was already afoot. He had slept three hours of the night and was fit in every atom of his huge body, freshly bathed and clothed, the pink and posy of masculine fastidiousness. The great open room was in progress of being cleaned from its night's fever, refurbished for the day. There were no women about. Only four or five Chinamen padding about at their work, neat and silent, their long queues hanging down against their black-silesia-covered backs.

There were a thousand Celestials in Reading's Flat, the expert and delicate-fingered gleaners behind the careless miners, and they were getting rich, keeping their wealth with wisdom, making ready for the time of their return to their native land as potentates.

Where the white man dug and passed, adhering to his high-handed custom of "nothing deeper than a spade handle," the patient Chinese delved to bed-rock. A little later his careless brother was to do the same, but not now, not while the gold lay so near the surface, while riches might be flung out in a day, lost at the green tables and once

more be gathered from rocker and sluice, all with so little work that labour and its just reward became confused, lost their perspective.

Clehollis, standing in the great doorway where the massive doors were swung wide, looked down across the moiling camp to where the three newcome wagons stood on the little flat.

His keen eyes took in every detail—the look of substantial trimness which characterized the foremost, the compact camp with its lack of the customary litter, the four lean but fine black horses picketed a little way apart. He was looking alertly for the woman of whom he had heard, and presently he saw her.

He noted the unusual height and build of her long, graceful, sturdy body, the black head held so high, the strength and deftness of the arms that lifted and swung a big child up to the schooner's footboard.

Presently he saw Texas Tom swaggering down the busy street and beckoned him with an imperious finger.

"What did you find last night, Tom?" he queried smiling. "I didn't see you boys when you came back from your pilgrimage. Did McGee get a good look at your madonna?"

The boy smiled.

"Sure did, Clehollis," he said, "he sure as blazes did! *Look* was just prezackly *what* he did."

"Yes?"

Texas bent over suddenly shaken with laughter.

"That big hairy grizzly was in th' lead with the rest of us follerin', all waitin' to see what he'd do an' say—an' he never said a word! Man alive! He tucked his tail between his legs an' hit back fer camp in an' overwhelmin' an' stupendous silence! An' all because a woman looked up at him with two black lamps of eyes an' said two words! Just two words, Mr. Clehollis!"

"Yes?"

Clehollis' eyes were aglow with dawning appreciation.

"They must have been potent words to turn Bob McGee. I saw him face Two Gun Billy at Red Bluff last year and laugh in his beard. What were they?"

"Nothin', just nothin'," said the boy gleefully. "She just said 'Well?' with a risin' inflection, kind of like a pretty question; an' then she saw the looks of that string an' she said 'Well!' but it wasn't any question an' it wasn't pretty, not by a durn sight! It was 'right-about-face'—an' we faced just like a file of soldiers."

Clehollis turned in his teeth the fine cigar which had come from the Indies round the Horn, considering.

"Quite a woman, I take it, eh, Texas?" he said.

"Quite a woman, an' no mistake, I'd say," replied the other, "an' if I'm any guesser it ain't a case of take it. Th' man that tries to 'take' her

will have a large an' full size job cut out for him. She ain't the takin' kind."

Texas went on his swaggering way among the flowing tide of humanity that filled the street and left the gambler still considering.

Before the Bull-Baker Outfitting Store a long line of pack-mules stood, their drivers busy loading up the *aparajos* with everything under heaven which folk lost in this vast wilderness of hill and stream and valley might desire or need. Ploughs, chairs, tables, iron and provisions, all went on the towering loads to be carried into the great back country of the Shastas and the Trinities at God alone knew what cost of monumental labour, of strain and struggle, to the patient mules that bore them. Even a safe weighing three hundred and fifty-two pounds had gone in the summer before, while the *Yreka Herald* was taking a printing press this trip.

The drivers and their helpers swore and laboured with the unwieldy parts, but finally all was in readiness and the train, comprising one hundred mules, not counting the small white bell-mare in the lead, wound away up the road towards the north—the road that ran from California to the Oregon country, or would in another season.

Now it was but a trail for these patient feet, with branches running to the different mush-room diggings—a trail that was to make history, that had already made it—the old trail of the Hudson Bay Fur Company running up the Sac-

ramento river, through the Shasta Valley—through the one long street of Reading's Flat—across the Klamath, over Siskiyou Mountain, into Oregon—literally the Oregon Trail.

No wagon had as yet been over it between the California diggings and the upper settlements in Oregon.

Six wagons, brought down by Lindsay Applegate, had come as far as Wagon Valley, where they had to be abandoned, and one other belonging to that intrepid and bold prospector, Governor Joseph Lane, had reached the same point, but from there south to Sacramento no wheel had been turned in this direction.

But now the great hegira was coming. It was well under way. Humanity was flooding in from the overland trails, and it was certain as the day that soon the two pouring streams would come together. California was waiting with open arms and lap spread wide to welcome her hoards. They came by way of Platte River Valley, over the South Pass and into Humboldt Valley, down Pitt River. They came by Lassen's Cut Off and by Bear River Ridge, by Truckee and through Carson Pass, over the Santa Fé Trail beside the Rio Grande, and up from the Gila into Tuolumme and the Mariposa diggings. A hundred thousand folk were on the move.

Like a flower opening to the sun the West was opening to settlement. Like a wanton she cajoled and coaxed and showered those she desired with

gold. She offered land as rich as river silt for cultivation, as fair as the ante-chamber of Heaven wherein to lay their hearth-stones.

She kissed and caressed, promised and showed wherewith to fulfill those promises. And most of those who came, eager-eyed and willing, fell in love with her upon the spot. Few of all those intrepid pioneers ever went back across the Plains.

So it was with Sandra Dehault.

This new land was her land, hill, stream and valley.

It filled her soul with passionate delight, set dreams, heaven-high and gorgeous, drowsing in her eyes.

She was set, rooted already, in the narrow valley between the wooded ridges.

And she was profoundly happy.

On that morning following their arrival she held her last conversation with the women of her party, for in two more hours she was outcast from their prim and narrow minds, disgraced and scandalized.

Holding Hester by a hand, with Connie coupled out beyond, with the unnamed babe on her shoulder and her neat head bare in the early light, Sandra went to talk to the Reverend Bedial Print. There were many questions she wished to ask concerning their preparations for the coming winter, the matter of housing coming first, since the lack of shelter and adequate protection against

the elements was so glaringly apparent on every hand.

The minister was a good man, single of purpose and sincere, but cast in a shallow mould and somewhat bigoted. He did not approve of the girl, had never done so, and since the day in Sacramento he shared the view-point of the womenfolk. However, he was a server of his God and must needs do what he could. Therefore he told her what his plans were, first for a cabin—there seemed a wealth of material in the thickly pine-clad hills—and later for a church. Labour, he opined, could surely not be high with men running like ants in every direction.

What a laughable surprise was in store for the good man!

And what a grave predicament, for the winter rains were due in a few short weeks, and there was nothing between them but the thinned and weathered cover of the trail-worn schooner.

And so Sandra took counsel of him, nodding her black head from time to time, and went back to her camp with pictures whirling before her vision, pictures of a tiny cabin, warm and neat, lit by log fires on its hearth, with goodly shelves and beds built to the walls, its windows draped and brightened by certain old and priceless stuffs that were even now safe in the horsehair boxes—and with her three babes playing of nights on its white wood floors.

Jason Craig came by and stopped a moment,

handing her a package done up in coarse brown paper with a Boston mark.

"There they be," he said briefly, "an' they cost two dollars more than all you give me."

Sandra's face flushed.

"Of all the robbers!" she said indignantly. "How dare they charge like that!"

The man, more given to patient reason, answered sagely.

"Every made thing comes over th' Plains or round th' Horn," he said.

The girl considered.

"Yes," she said presently, "it does. You're right, Jason. They *have* to charge. And think what I said to the poor man in the store at Sacramento! When I next go there I'll have to apologize."

She was laughing as she spoke, as at a funny memory, and Jason looked at her quickly.

"You goin' back?" he asked.

"Surely—sometime. There's society there—it's the heart of the country—and I must see all. Everything. I thank you for the errand, friend. And I'll get you the money if you'll wait a minute."

CHAPTER VIII

THE CABIN WITH THE SUNRISE WINDOW

"Good land o' Goshen!" gasped Lilith Craig. "Mandy, look! Look yon!"

The spinster, holding a long-handled iron "spider" in her bony hand, let the bacon grease drip unnoticed down the front of her denim apron. Her thin-lipped mouth hung open for once and her pale eyes bulged. Her sister followed her pointing finger with an incredulous glance, and Mrs. Print, stopped in her tracks, did likewise.

For a trim figure was swinging out from Sandra's camp toward the town, a beautiful trim figure whose free stride covered goodly space at every step, whose stitched boots confined man's trousers at the knee, whose slim waist was belted, and whose gay red shirt hung upon its jaunty shoulders as no man's ever did. Its black head, encircled by its shining braids, was bare to the mild autumn sun, and astride its left hip sat a chubby child, fair curls bobbing and little arms clinging to the throat that rose like a tawny column from the open neck of the flannel shirt.

Sandra Dehault, stepping forth to the "diggin's," to life and all it meant in the new era,

happy, eager, unafraid—a woman with the soul of a cavalier and the heart of eternal youth.

As she entered the end of the teeming street the thousand activities died into paralyzed quiet for a space around her, and this quiet space travelled with her as she advanced, exactly like a disc of oil on troubled waters.

Men stared at her in utter amaze, too taken aback for any other emotion, for she was the first and only woman of that time and place to present herself to men's view in such habiliments. And Sandra, smiling, lifted her child a trifle higher in the bend of her arm and swept them all in a glance at once eager, interested and friendly.

She passed the blacksmith shop where iron-thewed workers were already busy with the hooves of countless mules, stopped a short moment to watch, and went on, searching the signs above the open door—saloon, and store, and once again saloon. On every hand she saw the latter. In fact, so many signs with that one word caught her attention that she stopped in unconscious grace, holding the child, and counted them, her red lips moving soundlessly.

"Fourteen!" she said, half audibly. "Fourteen saloons!"

Directly opposite, the Rough and Ready, most opulent of all, was already filling with the day's tide. Its doors stood wide above its rough pine porch and the tinkle of a very fine piano came suddenly out on the clear air.

Satan's Sister, full-breasted, handsome in a heavy way, already dressed in her gay finery, was running her fingers over the ivory keys—magic fingers, white as snow and strong as hickory, that could take the human heart with its thousand complex emotions and fling it sobbing among the strings. Many a man, drunk on the fire and fever of the times, had dropped for an anguished second in some corner and wept for the life and love he had left across the world when Satan's Sister played. And, in another moment, swung on the tide of music, he would, as like as not, be dancing wildly with his arms around Daisy Dean, his degraded lips pressing kisses on her hair.

So Satan's Sister played, and Sandra Dehault, standing in the open road, listened delightedly. For a long moment she listened, her lips parted and her eyes resting on the far-away blue tops of the hills, and then she turned and walked up the steps that led to the Rough and Ready.

She leaned in the doorway, Connie peering in with her, and surveyed the scene. There were many men present, some sitting at small round tables playing cards, others lounging here and there, indolently smoking, for this was still morning, and yet more ranged along the bar where glasses stood in rows and Dan Clehollis' neat bartender arranged his bottles for the trade of the later day.

Here, as in the road outside, activity ceased with the sight of her and every eye fastened up-

on her in wonder—a woman—in pants—with an innocent child on her hip—standing in the door of the most notorious dance-and-gambling hall north of Sacramento! The woman of whose coming the camp had gossiped a few hours before, Texas Tom's Madonna.

All the town had heard of her beauty. It stood aghast now at its realization. For Sandra Dehault was more than beautiful, she was magnetic. There was about her a sweet and honest seeming which held back the common thoughts attendant on the average woman alone in that land—and yet, what was she doing there?

At that moment a door opened at the far back of the long room and Dan Clehollis entered. He walked forward, his astonished eyes fixed on the apparition in the doorway.

As he came near and caught the full effulgence of her, one immaculate hand swept the broad hat from his head and he bowed low, as only he could bow of all the population of Reading's Flat.

"Welcome, madam," he said, "welcome to our midst. Is there anything, anything at all, any single thing on earth, that I can do for you?"

The girl in the doorway looked him over coolly.

"No," she said presently, "no, sir. There is nothing. I just wanted to hear the music, real music and the first of its kind that I have heard for a matter of some eight long months."

And with a high nonchalance she walked past

him, threaded between the tables, and came to the dais where the player sat.

When Satan's Sister finished with a flourish and whirled on her stool, she looked full into Sandra's face, saw her right hand extended.

"Lovely!" the stranger said. "You are an artist, my dear, playing on one's heartstrings. It is good—and I am music hungry. Play some more for me."

The dance-hall woman stared at her, trying with her trained perceptions to "figure her out," as she told her friends later, and failing. Then Sandra's hand touched her bare arm, and she turned on the stool once more.

So it was that Sandra Dehault sat down on the dais' edge with her child on her trousered knees, and listened to the full content of her soul, while Satan's Sister chose for her vehicle none other than that classic of the times, "The Maiden's Prayer," and played it through.

When it was done she looked down with her hard eyes and saw the sigh that raised the other's breast.

"I was thinking," said Sandra, looking up, "of the graves we left on the long trail out—of the hopes that never fruited—of the dreams that died. You can touch the depths, *ma chèrie*. I thank you."

She rose.

"I am going to live here," she said. "I hope to build me a cabin with a fireplace—and white floors

—and two windows, one to the east to catch the first of the sunrise, and one to the west to watch the sun go down. When it is finished come to see me, will you not?"

Satan's Sister smiled.

"Perhaps by that time you will reconsider, madam," she said—and none present had ever heard from her notorious lips the staid simplicity of language which came to her upon the instant—"and will recall that invitation."

"I will not," said Sandra flatly. "Why should I?"

Sister shrugged her shoulders.

"True," she said. "Why should you?"

But she purposely did not take the hand the other was once more holding out.

Sandra Dehault went back to her camp and busied herself about her duties, and inside an hour all Reading's Flat knew that she was come to stay at the diggings, and that she must have a cabin built, with the result that by sundown another delegation headed this time by Dan Clehollis himself, sought her fire and begged for the privilege of erecting that same.

They sat about in a solemn ring and held conclave, with Texas Tom in silent, adoring attendance, and Bill Hardy of the Buzzard's Roost and Peter Farland of the Palace Hotel, not to mention Bunt Burson and Sheriff Hayden Shard bringing up reinforcements.

They discussed ways and means, wages and time for construction, and throughout all there was a tense carefulness of speech.

"But, gentlemen," said Sandra, and the minors slid delectably upon the word, "I know, considering what I paid for provisions at Sacramento, and for these"—she touched the striped trousers that covered her bended knee, and which were painfully recognized by Burson, from whose small Outfitters' Emporium they had come—"that the wages you mention are ridiculously low. Is it really true that I can hire carpenters for a dollar a day?"

Clehollis cast a warning glance about the circle.

"Well," he said gracefully, "that is a trifle low, yes, ma'am. But—you—a lady alone—with a family—you see, ladies are so rare and precious in this new West that every man here would gladly work a little cheaper to make you—one—comfortable. They will each and all—am I not right, boys?—each and all right gladly knock off the extra two bits from the regular one dollar and twenty-five cents a day—just to see you housed and settled before the rains. What say, boys?"

There was a hearty chorus of assent, albeit the gasp of Texas was distinctly audible.

"One twenty-five!" he chuckled to himself. "My great Aunt Maria! Th' ducks an' drakes begins!"

And so Sandra struck her first bargain in the new land, sitting late that night beside her fire, drunk with the vision of a shining cabin, with

"one window to the east to catch the sunrise," with gay stuffs at the windows and with a fire upon its hearth. It is a familiar and homely vision, the birthright of every human heart, and to this woman, who had known much better, it was beautiful as dawn.

And dawn found her up and doing, for this was to be a great day for her and hers.

By nine o'clock Dan Clehollis, Peter Farland and Bill Hardy had come solemnly across the flat to consult about location, and she turned happy eyes across the wide road and towards the west.

"If no one else has chosen it," she said, "that clear space yonder, far at the town's end. It slopes a bit, and the house could face the south with vines next summer for a shelter at the door—and in the end the sunrise window——"

"It's free ground, ma'am," said Clehollis, "or was a moment back. It's yours now. Where do you want the hearth?"

Clehollis led the way and Sandra followed, trailing her babes with the wee one bobbing on her shoulder, to the sweet spot on the slope beyond.

She stepped her cabin's size, swinging in unconscious grace with a thousand distant eyes upon her, laid down her plan for door and hearth and window, and her face was flushed with happiness.

The men set stones for markers, and the gambler drew out a ponderous gold watch to tell the time.

"They should be coming," he said looking up.

"They are," said Farland.

And they were—as strange a procession as the roaring camp had ever witnessed, and that was a distinction.

Down from the wooded skirts of the hills in all directions men and mules and yet more men were crawling, and every mule hauled at the end of rope or chain a slim white object, shining in the light, a pine log trimmed and peeled and straight as a die.

Here and there two men pulled together, being so luckless as to have no mule, since, overnight, anything which could haul a log had become priceless. As it was, the Weaverville pack train had been commandeered, at a monstrous price, for twenty-four hours.

Sixty-seven men—at a dollar each!—had been up since long before day, cutting, trimming, fastidiously selecting, discarding and selecting again, the slim pine logs which were to go to the making of this cabin for this woman whose fame was already widespread as the camp itself.

Five men with shake-frees were splitting the long sweet-scented shingles from the choicest sections of the primest fir tree they could find, and Hayden Shard himself was in charge of those who hauled the foundation stones for corner and fireplace.

Clehollis, who engineered it all, could have had a thousand helpers, for every man in Reading's Flat longed for a hand in the building.

At noon Sandra, flushed and sparkling, came to ask that all file by her camp for a cup of the precious coffee which steamed delectably in her copper washboiler.

"I should have liked to offer food as well," she told Clehollis, "but I have not so much."

The gambler bowed, waving a grandiloquent hand.

"Such a cup, madam," he said, "from such a hand is—ambrosia."

"Look!" said Lilith Craig, "sixty-eight men! Count 'em! Th' scarlet woman at her work!"

There was only Mandy to look, for Jason had been absent all the morning, gone somewhere with his gun and dog.

But say what they might in venom—and there were more women than Lilith and her associates who looked with sullen and suspicious eyes on that day's work—it was a lovely sight that greeted the eye at sundown, a skeleton cabin, its eight-inch logs dovetailed with meticulous care, its door posts flatted by adze and draw-knife, its hearthstones laid, its chimney mudded up, and the slender rafters ready for the shakes.

By noon next day it was finished—a work of art—and Sandra, standing on its flat door-stone, made the prettiest small speech imaginable, and paid out to each man as he passed one dollar and fifty cents, the modest price of a day and a half of labour.

Clehollis, smiling, took her hand and doubled it back upon the coin she proffered him.

"You don't owe me anything," he said softly, "not me."

Instantly the woman straightened.

"No?" she said. "Yes, sir, I do. I owe you this—and thanks. A debt is abhorrent to me. I will have none. Take it."

There was in the words the warning tone of the "well" she had used to Bob McGee, and once again it was effective.

Clehollis took his wage and walked back to camp, considering.

He dropped the coins in a small pocket of his waistcoat and now and again he chuckled.

At the Rough and Ready Angel Allie leaned against the wall and watched him come. Her pretty blue eyes were hard and bright as sapphires and fully as clear and dark, their controlled depths for once moving with lights, like troubled waters. She was very wise, this little childlike woman, and she knew men. Not a movement of the day had missed her comprehension. She, more accurately than any one in Reading's Flat, foresaw the coming whirlwind power of the woman who owned the fine new cabin, and her narrow breast beat heavily with hatred.

But, as Clehollis drew near, she smoothed the set lines from her quiet lips, drooped the too-widely opened lids over the blue lights of her eyes, and smiled at him.

"Dan," she said, "I wish you'd settle his hash for that young Irishman from Panama. He won't let me alone, and I don't want him."

Clehollis' mouth hardened from its smiling.

This woman was his property; infringement angered him, roused his quick jealousy, the temper that was always near the surface in him.

"I will," he said briefly. "How'll I do it, Angel, permanently or temporarily?"

"Don't kill him," she answered quickly. "I hate to feel blood on your hands, Dan. They're too fine an' soft—a gentleman's hands."

And with a consummate skill she touched his palm lightly and drew her hand away. Clehollis circled her with his arm and took her with him as he entered the dance hall.

"That long-faced parson was here a while ago, Clehollis," said Texas Tom, "askin' for you, though he wouldn't come in. Somethin' important."

"Yes?" returned the boss absently. "If he comes again, call me."

"Ain't no need. Yon he is now."

The Reverend Bedial Print was looking into this ante-chamber of hell, one long hand on the lintel.

Clehollis walked back towards him.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Repent of your sins, brother," said the Reverend solemnly, "and be saved before it is too late."

"The blazes!" said Clehollis disgustedly.

"And, sir," went on the preacher imperturbably, "I come to offer you work."

"Eh? Work?"

"Yes, sir. If you will guarantee to do as neat and quick a job for me as you did for Miss Dehault, I'll hire you and your men to put up a house for me. And, if the work is satisfactory, I make no doubt Mr. Jason Craig will also hire you. I think, however, in view of the two contracts, that you should reduce the wage a little, say ten cents on the dollar. What do you say?"

Dead silence fell with the last words.

Amazement sat on the long room of the dance hall like a veritable cover. And then, as Clehollis bent over shaken with laughter, a cyclone struck the place. Men yelled and beat their hands, stamped on the floor and pounded the bar with anything they could grab, rocking in a gale of merriment, for this was the funniest thing they had ever heard.

"I'm afraid, Preacher," said the gambler wiping his eyes, "that you have hit the wrong diggin's. You're too innocent for this wicked world. I'm sorry to say, but I quit the carpenter business an hour ago, and so did the rest. I'm real grieved to tell you, but you'll have to build your house yourself."

CHAPTER IX

A CRY OF PORTENT

Winter came down upon the west coast country. The gorgeous gold and crimson, blue and lavender, of the long warm fall gave place to sudden green that sprang alive upon the whole world with the first soft rains. It came out upon the hills and valleys like a faint, hardly discernible veil rising from the very heart of the earth itself.

To the new-comers it was an astounding circumstance, the look and colour of the spring in fall. It lacked one thing, the *feel*. This strange, sweet phenomenon had a seeming, a sense, that was all its own. It did not feel like spring.

All along the Sacramento river there were many trees which did not shed their foliage, and those which waited for the snows were disappointed.

The weather was not cold. The rains fell, and stopped, and fell again, soft, misty day-long showers which no one minded in the least. The life of the town went on as swiftly as though the sun were shining. Men fought and roistered, played and speculated, came in from the diggings and went again in swarms.

The boats plied up the river from Yerba Buena,

or San Francisco as it was being called, and the *John Hayes* had even established a run as far north as Red Bluff.

Gold went down in rough boxes, and the editor of a paper in San Francisco printed exultantly a scare headline which said:

"At last we have an export—AND IT IS GOLD!"

And there was not lacking a certain society in the river town.

Mayor Richards had a very good house, and through his influence Mr. John Grey secured materials and labour to erect for himself a mansion somewhat out on the edge of the metropolis in the direction of Captain Sutter's Fort.

This was a two-story affair, with tall narrow windows and ginger-bread stairways. It was furnished with an elegance unsurpassed in the land —if one did not count the marvellous *haciendas* of the Spaniards on the *ranchos* round about— and was one of the show places of the pridefull times in a very short while.

Mrs. Grey was a splendid hostess and amply backed up the position of her husband, who was established in the banking business on I street.

And, bright stone in this substantial setting, their only child, Lilian, was as noticeable as one star in a velvet sky.

Mr. Grey, an expert judge of horseflesh, spent much time in finding and selecting for her a suitable mount, and on days when the sun shone,

this beautiful girl became a familiar sight on the more quiet roads about, her golden hair primly confined beneath a small green velvet hat with a white plume hanging on her shoulder, and her long green velvet riding-habit falling to the knees of as fine a silver-grey gelding as one might find in a month's journey. This horse was young, spirited, eager, yet gentle and of a wondrously sweet temper.

Small as she was Lilian was a good horsewoman, had a prim, pridefull seat in her white leather side-saddle, and was not afraid.

The pale, sparkling, fair beauty of the two, their grace and elegance of bearing, fairly took the new town off its feet, and men spoke of them in hushed respectful tones.

The name which Buck Lockwell had given her that night of arrival, when he had peered down in her unconscious face, had stayed, and she was known in every quarter as The Golden Lily.

So modestly famous did she soon become, after the swift fashion of the times, that the word, passed from mouth to mouth, that she was coming down the street could, and did, empty even so important an edifice as the Stinking Tent, and several fortunes were arrested in the losing and the making, that those who played might look for a moment upon innocence personified in that roaring and Godless land.

She rarely rode alone. Nearly always the banker himself rode beside her on a powerful bay, and

sometimes Stanton Halliday was with them, a slim, gallant figure, smiling, easy in every muscle; and sometimes again the two young people were alone.

Halliday was rich, a known figure of the day, one of those who, stumbling on a claim richer than ordinary where all was rich, had taken his wealth and put it wisely away. He owned the "Door of Evening Haze," which fantastic and poetic name for a mine was a small clue to the nature of the man himself, though it was the habit of the miners to name their claims with vast extravagance. He was also interested in several enterprises which were making enormous returns, owned a pack-train working north, and was a shareholder in two freight boats which plied from San Francisco.

And he was happy with the simple and priceless joy of life, the consciousness of health and physical well-being.

Wherever his slim, slow-moving figure appeared he was a favourite, especially with women. There was in him a certain quality of fineness, of gentleness, and yet of controlled spirit, which set him aside, even in this land where men outnumbered women a thousand to one.

At the new home of the Greys he was a welcome visitor, though he came a trifle formally, usually upon the banker's invitation, for the old and interrupted friendship between the Richards

and the Greys had been resumed, half across a world, with great fervour.

On a grey day when wisps of strange white fog trailed along the levels he sat, swung side-wise in his saddle, his hand playing with the silken mane that rippled on his horse's neck, and looked down upon the waters of the river.

"There's a lot to think about down there," he said, musing, "power and helplessness, for the current, running without volition of its own, is yet a mighty force."

The girl beside him turned her sweet blue eyes upon the broad brown flood, for the rains had raised the river far beyond its ordinary level.

"Like life," she said timidly, blushing a bit beneath her rose-leaf skin at the boldness of her comparison; "life, that seems to rush forward blindly, out of all control, and yet is so strongly used and directed by some people. I"—again the lovely pink tide beneath the waxen cheeks—"I am one of the bystanders. I will never seize and direct. I must take what the river brings me and be content."

Halliday looked at the speaker in profound surprise. It was his first glimpse into the mind beneath the meek gold curls, the swift opening and closing of a spiritual door which he had not suspected.

"But I am sure," he said quickly, "that the river will bring you nothing but happiness—one so little and so kind."

He smiled, his grey eyes studying the delicate beauty of her, and the pink flush deepened.

In a quick and unexplainable confusion the girl drew rein and led back towards the town's more settled part, her slim green-clad figure erect and dignified.

At a cross-road among the picturesque and heterogeneous shacks that housed the moiling swarms of humanity two men were standing as if they had just met. One was drunk and swaying on his feet, a tall, thin figure of a man with shallow eyes and all the finery of habiliment which gold could buy in the hectic town. A long-tailed black coat flared open to show a waistcoat of figured satin over a flannel shirt, and pale grey trousers bulging over coarse boots. A chain of raw gold nuggets, drilled and tied together with thin linen cord, rode his narrow breast in opulence. He held in one hand a bottle of liquor, which he waved towards the other in wide gestures.

"Corn likker," he said garrulously, "yes, sir, Brought fum ol' Missouri. Last o' hits kin' in this hyar country. Pledge ye, doc. Hyar's how to gold an' what hit buys."

The other, a slim, well-built man with a refined but milk-white face under a thatch of waving dark hair, stood with his feet close together and actually swayed with the swaying of the grandiloquent hand, his sick eyes fastened on the shining bottle.

As the riders drew near he wet his dry lips,

shook his head, shook it again, and reached out one hand that trembled exceedingly.

It was plain as the light of day that he was fighting temptation and was ready to lose. Halliday looked at him in a quick pity, but Lilian Grey, sensing the bare soul's struggle on the dramatic instant, did more.

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "Please don't take it!"

Doctor Bidwell, already known as a man of genius with his medicines and his surgeon's knives straightened up with a snap.

The trembling hand went to his hat and lifted it. The cavernous dark eyes flashed up to the girl's face with the look of one drowning, succoured. They clung there helplessly, as if, drained of strength himself, this poor piece of human weakness would draw strength from any source to tide him over. The very wonder of this girl's great beauty held him, as it were, against the strain, and in the tense moment that followed the pinched whiteness seemed to melt from his features and he became normal again. A slight flush flooded under his skin and he bowed in silence.

But Lilian Grey, realizing what she had done, flamed crimson from brow to throat, and touching the gelding, rode swiftly forward. When Halliday caught up with her she was still painfully confused.

"Oh, I am shameless," she said distressedly,

"to speak to those drunken men! What would my mother say to me!"

"What any good woman would say," said he, "that, like an angel from Heaven, you had stooped to save. That is Doctor Bidwell, a man who came with the Lightfoot train, and who has been doing splendid work among the sick of the town. I know John Lightfoot and his wife Ann, and they have held to him with the iron grip of brotherly love for all these many weeks, trying to keep him from these Hasper boys. That's Jard Hasper, who cleaned up at the Stinking Tent a while back, and if ever there was a bad one in this wild spot it's he. I hope——"

Halliday turned and glanced back.

"Yes, Miss Lilian," he said softly, "your cry worked. The doctor is going on—alone."

At the Grey mansion Halliday, dismounting, lifted the girl to the stepping-block, and his eyes were very soft upon her. For the first time he held the tiny hand a brief moment at parting, looked longer than usual at the soft curve of little chin and rose-leaf cheek. For the first time this young daughter of his uncle's friends had appeared to him in the light of character, a deep, clear stream running in narrow channels, that might present to the learning eye undreamed-of beauties.

As he rode away towards the busy town beyond, he sat thinking, hands crossed on his saddle-bow, and for some inexplicable reason another

face came sharp upon his vision, a face beautiful as this fair face he had just left, but in another way—a live, sparkling, eager and indomitable face whose inner intents and purposes were unfathomable. Many a time since that day in Bickford's store this flaming face had come before his mind's eye, only to be laid aside with sternness, for to Stanton Halliday that incident had held a painful memory.

Everything about the woman had pointed to a wrong plane of life; and yet what marvellous beauty she had possessed! What a drawing power lay in her long dark eyes, what a thrill was in her finger-tips upon his arm, what a flash of mental darkness, rich and perfumed, accompanied the kiss she had laid upon his cheek!

A bold woman, a laughing, happy-hearted woman, a daring, gay creature, who took what she wanted and was afraid of nothing.

A love-woman pre-eminently, a man's woman, a —Halliday would not speak the word even in his own mind, and yet it stuck there like an evil bur—a *Jezebel.*

Time after time he had been on the point of ascertaining her name from John Lightfoot, and as often had refrained.

To-day, with the first intimate touch in his palm of Lilian Grey's fine hand, he turned his horse's head in the direction of the river, where the Lightfoots had put up their modest domicile.

CHAPTER X

A STIR IN THE BLOOD

That day by the river was set aside in two young hearts, unconsciously by one, consciously, tremulously, almost fearfully by the other.

To Stanton Halliday something had happened —something vague, faint, almost unrecognizable, but tangible nevertheless.

He who had walked without women, seriously, so far, was suddenly lonely for them. There was a faint unrest within him, a stir and quiver of new life, new promise of future ecstasy.

He scarcely knew when he turned his horse towards John Lightfoot's cabin, or what manner of conversation he used to bring about the mention of a woman's name, but when he rode away an hour later he knew all that John Lightfoot knew concerning the girl, Sandra Dehault, a spinster, of Missouri, bereft of all kin by a sickness which had swept the silt lands, possessed of considerable money from the sale of her inheritance, and whose soul was the gay and intrepid soul of the true adventurer, a pioneer to her boot-heels. He got from Ann in high praise the story of the Gephart babes, and heard about her strength and

bravery in the thousand and one hardships and difficulties of the crossing.

But on the one point which stood out in his consciousness, namely, her character, he got nothing.

That he must supply for himself, and, alas! he had nothing on which to build save and except the memory of one bold kiss, given wantonly before a multitude.

Lilian Grey, small, sweet, fragile as a flower, knelt by her bed that night and said a long, long prayer. It was greatly incoherent, being mainly given over to petitions for erring souls, for humility, and for more worthiness in her own white maiden's heart. It was disjointed, having lapses in which there came across her meditations a slim horseman whose grey eyes searched her downcast face, whose firm hand lingered a moment in its polite clasp.

Ah, magic hour! When Youth first meets Love in some enchanted by-way of the glorious earth!

So, meek and white in her pale beauty, small hands in their be-laced dimity ruffles folded on her virgin breast, the girl slept.

Her golden curls fluffed on her pillow and the long fair lashes lay on the delicate cheeks like a fringe of sunlight swung against a flower's sheen.

Mrs. Grey, tiptoeing in with a lamp shaded by her hand, looked long at this pure vision of loveliness and sighed unconsciously. She thought of

the night of their arrival on the *Senator,* and of the child's strange, fanciful words concerning life in the new land: "I feel as if, somehow, great happiness awaits me here, and great sorrow. I glow—inside me—and shiver too. I can't explain it."

To the mother-heart, ever mysteriously attuned to its offspring's weal or woe, there came some dim prescience of disaster, and the sonsy, level-headed woman stooped and kissed a strand of the silken hair with tears suddenly clouding her vision.

Stanton Halliday, lounging among the players in the Stinking Tent, saw the three Haspers, all gambling recklessly and all winning, go from game to game, their hats cocked insolently over their excited eyes, their hawk-like faces flushed with drink.

"That's a bad bunch, if ever there was one," he said quietly to John Lightfoot, who had stopped beside him.

Between himself and this quiet, bearded man there was springing up a friendship.

The other nodded.

"They are bad medicine, sir," he returned, "and unsafe to trifle with. They are unstable of disposition, bigoted and foolhardy. Regular Missouri mountaineers."

"I've heard of their like. Make their own whiskey?"

"Moonshine. I put them out of my train three days out. That's how they came to beat us in, bringing you news of our coming. They had—caused me trouble. It was through their giving him liquor that Doc Bidwell was unable to save Hollis Gephart and his wife. Doctor Bidwell is a fine man at heart, kind and square, and but for the curse of drink would go far in this life. The Haspers are his undoing."

The two men stood together for an hour, watching the life that flowed around them, and once a painted woman came and put her arm on Halliday's shoulder, leering in his face with haggard eyes. John Lightfoot looked at her compassionately and with deep pity, but the younger man took her hand and put it from him firmly and decisively.

"Haven't I told you, Mame," he said quietly, "that you waste time on me?"

"Sure," said the woman, laughing, "but there's always a time, I figger, when a man—forgets."

"Not I," he said. "Go on among your—friends."

He had almost said "your kind," but his innate kindliness stopped the word on his lips.

"Haskin's Mame" passed on.

And a little later John Lightfoot bade him good night, saying he must go home to Ann, lest she fret at his absence.

Halliday watched him thread through the crowd, and just at the door he saw Doc Bidwell

meet and stop him with a hand on his arm. They talked a moment earnestly, and, turning, went out in the night together.

Tired of the noise and the hectic rush of the gambling, Halliday, too, threaded his way out and walked down the street towards the river. The mist and fog of the day had given place to a cool wind and there were many stars on a steel-blue sky. These trembled endlessly in the moving mirror of the dark river and Halliday stood looking down upon them.

"She must 'take what the river brings her,'" he mused, "little white flower of girlhood—The Golden Lily. Will it bring her fair fields and sunlit meadows, I wonder, or—wreck and drowned hopes? This long, strong river of life!"

And almost upon the heels of the thought of Lilian came the vision once more of Sandra Dehault, the—Madonna or Jezebel?

He saw the piteous babes in her gracious arms —felt the warm moist flower of her red mouth on his cheek.

Vexed beyond measure at himself, his amazing double reaction to womanhood in its antithesis, he snapped his fingers, and, turning from the river, walked briskly back up J street.

As he once more neared the gambling house there came, sharp and sudden on the still night air, the crack of a shot, then others in quick succession.

For a second there was the utter stillness of

shock, and then there came one long, wild cry, the veritable wail of passage as a human soul took flight.

With the blood in his veins congealing, Halliday ran the last few steps and stemmed the tide of humanity that bulged from the wide doorway of the Tent.

When he could see a strange sight met his vision.

Of all the crowded crew which had filled the place a short time back there was but one man left in prominence, the clerical faro dealer, standing up at his lay-out, one long arm outstretched, with a smoking six-shooter in his steady hand.

The corners were packed with huddled men, along the foot of the bar they crouched, and down beside the tables.

The bar-tender at the farther end was out of sight.

And stretched on the earth among the sand and litter lay a dead man, grotesquely relaxed, his own gun, sending up its wavering wisp of smoke, fallen from his open hand.

Holway Hasper, in the pink of his youth, his dead face still flushed from his last draught of the "ol' corn likker" brought so carefully across the Plains.

Beside his inert body knelt Britt, stupidly staring at his brother's dimming eyes, while farther away and in the open space toward the door stood

Jard, a raving maniac, chewing his nails, rocking on his heels and toes, whimpering aloud.

His shallow light-brown eyes were glittering and coal-black with the spreading of the pupils. His right hand held a gun, dangling as his fingers fumbled at his shaking lips. He was a terrible spectacle, a figure of fear, and the dealer, watching him with unblinking orbs, knew it.

About the whole tragic scene there was a solemn dignity, an awful beauty, even, for the light above the dealer's head, the table before him with his left hand resting on the edge, the little box that might have been a book, the plainness of his garb, the gravity and pallor of his face, all suggested a pulpit.

And when he spoke, this lost piece of flotsam on the tide of the times, the ringing depth of his tones confirmed the impression.

"Take up that man," he said sternly, "who, drawing the sword, hath perished by it. The wages of sin is death."

"Yes, durn ye!" screamed Jard Hasper. "An' Hell's a-waitin'!"

And with the first word, more quick than vision, the dangling, shaking hand became firm and potent, jerked up its gun and fired.

A blue spot shone for a second between the dealer's brows, then the tall figure bowed gently down upon the table among the scattered cards.

Backing, his wild face snarling and terrible, Jard Hasper went carefully toward the door.

"Come on, you!" he called to Britt. "Rustle!"

Britt got to his feet, and, under cover of the gun, joined him near the door. Still backing, they went through and disappeared. There was the rattle of spurs, the sound of running horses, and though those who listened did not know it, the regions of the Upper Sacramento were due to soon receive and hold a pair of outlaws destined to be famous.

Stanton Halliday, inured to the swift life of the times and no stranger to sudden death, felt a distinct nausea grip his vitals, and as the Tent sprouted men from every corner he once more went out in the night.

A few days later John Lightfoot spoke of the incident and Halliday recalled it with a shudder.

"The Haspers were bad, but Holway was the best, being the youngest," the ex-captain said, "and Jard was responsible for his training. I mind me when they first drove in to join up with my train, how the boy seemed just a youngster, a little bashful, but no better and no worse than any boy his age. He wasn't more than nineteen. Ann has been quite upset over it all."

"The other two have not been heard of since," said Halliday. "I hope they're gone for good."

"So do I. I do so fervently hope," said Lightfoot earnestly, "if for no other reason than Doctor Bidwell. He has come of his own accord to live at our house, under the gracious influence and

religious counsel of my wife, and with the Haspers out of the way I hope for his redemption."

Halliday looked at the speaker quickly.

"That is good," he said. "I think I saw the beginning," and he told of the incident of the cross-roads.

"It's marvellous—marvellous, sir, what a good woman can do just with a word—a look sometimes," said Lightfoot, "isn't it? She can hold a man from the pit."

"Or push him over," said Halliday, and hardly knew he spoke his thought aloud.

"I'm surprised to hear you say that, Mr. Halliday," said John Lightfoot, "and sorry. It seems to suggest a lack of faith in women."

"I apologize," returned the other, smiling, "and am surprised at myself for both the thought and the speech. Let us forget it. I don't know what was responsible for the heresy."

But he did know, deep in his inner consciousness, knew that it was the vision, recurrent and disquieting, of a dark face beneath shining braids of hair.

For another week Halliday was busy about his affairs. Sacramento was headquarters for the two freight-boats, and also for his pack-train. A thousand and one matters claimed his attention, and he had little time for thought; but twice he saw Lilian Grey, once at her father's house and again when she rode, alone for once, down the teeming lane of J street between two solid rows

of spectators who stood in respectful silence to watch The Golden Lily pass.

When girl and horse, both beautifully gentle and gently beautiful, had disappeared down the river road, a bearded miner in a red shirt laughed. A hairy fist too quick for sight filled the open mouth, and Buck Lockwell stood over the fallen blasphemer.

"If you hain't never known th' fear of angels," he gritted, "I'll put it into you."

And Halliday, witnessing the incident, felt a surge of anger within him that Buck Lockwell should have championed the girl.

That night for the first time he went, uninvited, to the mansion on the town's outskirts.

There was in his reception an element of surprised pleasure, evidenced in the banker's cordial handshake, in Mrs. Grey's smiling concern for his comfort, and in the flush that came and went under the fair skin of Lilian, the rapid rise and fall of her girlish breast, her utter inability to hold for any length of time the gold-fringed lids above her soft blue eyes. They fell and lifted and fell again, exactly as though there were too much light in the high-ceilinged room with its candle sconces beside the panelled doors.

There was fine horsehair furniture in this sedate room, portraits in oval golden frames, and a splendid grand piano. All these treasures had come in the ship that brought the banker and his family from the other side of the continent, and

their grandeur was enhanced a thousandfold by their setting in this wild land.

Halliday sat on a slippery, ornate sofa, and watched the slim little flower of a girl as, in obedience to her father's request, she settled herself on the round stool, spread her pale lavender skirts about her, and poised her hands above the ivory keys that were no whit whiter.

She had been taught the airs and graces of the day in Miss Fortesque's Young Ladies' School, and she had profited prettily thereby, for she played with sweetness and feeling the sentimental music then tremendously in vogue.

The soft light from the high candles—Mrs. Grey would have nothing else in this reception-room—fell with indescribable magic over the exquisite figure with its golden hair, so meekly parted on the girlish brow, its modestly low-cut bodice and its fair—so wondrously fair!—young face.

The grey eyes of the young man were steadily upon her, his keen face was grave. There was an unusually tender expression about his lips, and one hand lay relaxed upon the sofa's carved armrest.

Stanton Halliday did not understand himself, though Mr. John Grey did and felt a secret sense of well-being. What more to be desired than that this fine young man, nephew to his own life-long friend, should look thus upon his daughter? For what other end had the girl been born and bred than happiness, a settled place in life, honest and

requited love? The banker, still and for ever the lover of his wife, cast a discreet glance at that admirable lady and caught in her eyes the reflection of his identical thought.

And when, a little later, she rose and smilingly shook hands with Halliday, saying that, as she had been extra busy that day and was a trifle tired she would be excused, her husband seconded her.

Halliday, rising hastily, protested and was all for going, but Mr. Grey called him Stanton cordially, and said genially that youth was youth and he made no doubt two young people could find a deal to talk about, even though it might not be either important or sensible.

So Halliday found himself vaguely committed, for this was the situation known then as keeping company.

But with the first moment alone the surge of embarrassment subsided and he leaned forward and smiled at the girl with the small crinkling of his grey eyes that was fatal to women, albeit unconscious. Lilian, swung round upon the stool, looked for a moment at the lean dark face and could look no more. The golden lashes dropped, and to save her life the girl could find nothing to talk about, sensible or otherwise.

There fell upon her a trembling, a clutching of the throat that made her swallow, a blurring of her vision, which made of the three candles in the sconce beyond Halliday's fair head a full dozen.

They brought back swiftly to her mind the look of the stars in the dark tide below the *Senator's* rail, filled her suddenly with the aching joy which had hurt her then—and she felt once more the prescience of great ecstasy, great pain.

A little gasp parted the rosebud lips, one small hand went to her breast helplessly.

Halliday, talking rapidly about his pack-train and the fear of robbers which was becoming a settled thing in a land where theft was practically unknown, caught neither incident.

He, too, was labouring under a new excitement, a new uneasiness.

He spent a correct length of time, talking of a thousand irrelevant things, and when he rose to go the girl came and walked beside him to the entry-way to let him out. She came barely to his shoulder, a slight fair thing, and her lavender silk skirts bobbed beautifully over their modest hoop. Halliday looked down at her with new appreciation, new warmth. He felt himself loving the meek brow, the rounded cheeks between their falling curls, the small sweet rosebud of the mouth.

"Miss Lilian," he said suddenly, and he had not meant to say it, "did anyone ever tell you how entirely lovely you are?"

If she had flushed at the other times, she flamed adorably now.

And, strange anomaly, in the height of her self-conscious confusion she raised her eyes to his for one deep, startled look.

"No," she said, shaking her head, "no, sir. Only my father." She had put her hand upon the great door-knob and now she clutched down tight to still the tumult that was in her.

But the small grip was insufficient.

The man, trembling himself, saw the quivering of the little chin. Without volition he laid light fingers on the pretty wrist, held them there a moment, and bending suddenly he kissed the rose-leaf cheek.

Then he was gone—the door was closed again—and this girl, this sheltered, innocent creature—stood against it with both hands clasped above her leaping heart.

The exquisite face was lifted, laughter broke upon it like sunlight through rain, for the tears of purest joy followed that first kiss and dripped upon the lavender taffeta.

CHAPTER XI

THE MARK OF DESTINY

Stanton Halliday went back to his room at the Blue Drilling Hotel with his head whirling and the heart in his breast performing strange antics. One moment it was pounding fast and furiously, as if it sang a pæan of the ages, and the next it seemed to stop with the weight of diffidence and responsibility which hung upon it. At every turn he saw the face of Lilian Grey, small, lovely, trusting, the face of a veritable angel, and a humility so great as to be appalling fell upon him.

"What am I," he said to himself, "that I dared to touch her? How could I do it? I—an ordinary man! Little white flower of girlhood! The Golden Lily of the Sacramento. God make me worthy!"

He did not sleep but sat beside his open window watching the lights of the all-night gambling hells flicker through a veil of gems, for it had begun to rain.

He thought of all the things that confront a man at the crises of his life—of his virtues and his faults, was devoutly grateful for the former, regretted the latter with the keen poignancy of shame.

He summed up himself most pitilessly in the light of The Lily's purity, and the early dawn, coming grey upon the river first, found him bowed to the window-sill with his face in his hands.

He was very much a man, this lean young pioneer, and his natural instincts were right. Therefore he was humble, knowing himself, and if he could have eliminated certain memories common to mankind in that hour he would have cut off his right hand.

But with day he clothed himself with consummate care, and at the earliest moment presented himself at the Grey mansion.

The banker was not yet gone to his business, and Mrs. Grey met the visitor with some surprise, albeit with pleasure.

Lilian, they told him upon his question, was not yet down.

"You young folk are unreasonable," said Mr. Grey, "you stay up all hours of the night and expect your elders to understand. If we hadn't done the very same thing we couldn't do it, eh, my girl?" and he patted his wife's arm.

But the gravity of Halliday's face dispelled the older man's levity, and the mother went to call her daughter. When presently the two women appeared, it was a star-eyed creature, a radiant, half-fearful, open-lipped girl who came diffidently and looked at this man in such living adoration as to abase him to the dust.

A lump came in Halliday's throat with one look upon her, and he went forward simply and took her in his arms.

"You see, my friends," he said turning, "this came upon us suddenly—almost in an hour, I might say—and we had not time to ask your consent or to consult about it. Dare I ask it now?"

Mrs. Grey wept a little, and the banker blew his nose violently, pumping Halliday's hand, and they all kissed The Lily with varying emotions, and Halliday asked the girl to go for a ride, since the rain had ceased and a winter sun was shining gloriously.

And so destiny set its mark upon these two in happiness, thereby branding, in its far-reaching and unfathomable intents, two others in different fashion.

Halliday who, before this sudden and amazing change in his fortunes, had been on the verge of a northern trip in the interests of his pack-train, deferred his departure for a matter of ten days, and spent this time in a wonderful and constantly developing state of spiritual delight.

He was really getting acquainted with the soul that inhabited the beautiful body of The Golden Lily, and finding it the gentlest thing in all the universe. There was no shadow in its clear depths, no love of self, no thought of rebellion to the dicta of life, nothing that was not admirable.

This meek stander-by-the-stream-of-life was angel-fair inside and out, and this man, swept to

her side by that same mysterious stream, was appalled at her beauty.

At his coming she trembled visibly. At his rightful kisses she could not restrain the blushes of her modest maidenhood.

And she grew in beauty if such a thing were possible, glowing with the light of love that can transform the plainest creature.

The town, which adored her openly and boasted of her as its chiefest possession, was agape at her perfection.

Men who were lost to all good, roistering, swearing, drinking poineers of gold and its mania, stood hushed as she passed by, women with eyes like those of Haskin's Mame narrowed their lids and tightened their painted lips, looking upon her.

And Halliday, constantly with her now, was in a daze, it seemed.

He made a short trip out to the Door and took a month's provision to the man who was his partner. There was ample water, and with flume and sluice the mine in its high gulch was pouring out its treasure. This gold Halliday took back and deposited in Mr. Grey's bank.

His partner, one Dick Garfield, whom Halliday had literally pulled out of the mire of the dance-halls and set upon his feet, was a virile worker and safe only when in the hills. And he was getting rich as fast as his benefactor, though so far he had spent no pinch of the dust he garnered.

Some day he would go back to the East and to

those whom he had left there, if Halliday could get him past Yerba Buena and safe on shipboard, which task the younger man had grimly set himself to accomplish.

Meantime fortune waited on all and any who would take her by the foretop.

At the gaming tables men who were Crœsuses one day became paupers the next, while those who had nothing were as often lifted to opulence overnight. And not alone at the tables, for every day men were coming in to Sacramento from the surrounding diggings with more gold than they could estimate stowed about their ragged garments.

Fortunes were being made in merchandise as quickly as in the mines, for the difference in purchase price at the far sources of supply and sale upon the ground was almost anything a man might ask, and buyers crowded each other. Outfitters did a hectic business, for prospectors were passing north in thousands to the fabled bars, gulches, strikes and camps.

Reading's Flat, Briggsville, Horsetown lying along Clear Creek, with Grizzly Gulch, Hardscrabble and Mad Mule farther north, all called their motley hordes which poured away through rain and mud and such monumental hardships as only those intrepid, gold-mad men could stand. But stand them they did to a vast and amazing extent, for there was little sickness among them, and few died save with their boots on and with

promptness. They lived in the open, sleeping, eating, tramping and working, and they were hard as nails inside and out, in heart and muscle and iron nerve. The times made men of boys and super-men of men, so far as endurance and ability to take care of self went, and under and through all there was the wild thread of excitement and success which set work to the sound of song, cast care to the four winds, and with it much else that could ill be spared from manhood.

CHAPTER XII

THE BOLD DREAMS BECOME REALITY

If winter came to the valley of the Sacramento like a mild grey nun walking in her veils of mist, she came to the Shasta range like a weeping virago.

Rain swept down the mountains in long blue sheets. It washed the great hills clean, and all the marching ranks of the conifers stood stiff with freshness, their pointed tops lying up along the slopes one against another with the fair precision of woven tapestry. Singing hill-streams raced to the valleys, taking their yearly meed of erosion, and uncovering gold in every crevasse.

The whole world dripped and sang. And with it sang the bold heart of Sandra Dehault—Sandra Dehault, *miner*.

Miner and householder, adventurer and family-woman, vital to her finger-tips and glowing with the joy of work.

For back on Middle Creek there lay her claim!

Her mining claim, bona fide, regular as that of her booted and bearded neighbours on either side sixteen feet the width of the gulch which was the commonly accepted size, posted with her notices

and recorded with the officer appointed by the miners for the purpose.

She could have had her pick of a thousand claims already taken, but she shook her head and asked for advice instead.

And so, attended by all those who dared to go, she made her choice—and never knew that Dan Clehollis bought off the henchman whose stakes were already set on the likely spot, nor that he had removed the same.

But Reading's Flat knew it.

And Satan's Sister knew it.

Also Angel Allie.

All this had taken place a month ago, and the girl who called herself "as good a man as any" stood fairly up to her boast.

Pick and shovel and flat-pan made no harder work than she had experienced in the crossing, and the wild joy of gold was in her blood. Already she felt its swagger in her walk, knew the lure of its finding and possession. It lay in the pan's hollow rich and yellow, a ragged, heavy line of lumps little and big where the water flowed the sand from the flaring lip—it hung in her muddy palm with caressing weight.

"See!" she would cry to the men around her when a richer pan showed up. "Look, gentlemen!"

And no man-jack within sound of her voice but would stop work to come and stand admiringly at her claim's edge, looking down at the splendid

sight. The sight of the upturned sparkling face, its cheeks glowing red through the rain, its long eyes alight, its lips parted in excited laughter, its tool-hardened hands cupped full of dull gold nuggets.

No man there who thought of the gold, none but coveted the woman.

The woman extraordinary who walked among them fearlessly and took her meed of fortune, serenely confident in her equal right. During the amazing month she had been watched as under a glass and none had fathomed her.

Like a ring of wolves they watched her, waiting.

Who was she? What was she?

Could it be possible that she was what she frankly said she was, a miner like themselves, bent on the search for wealth?

There were few who thought so.

And yet the quality of her voice, the smooth, suave inflection of her "gentlemen" had held the ring in abeyance.

Also the clear, steady look of her eyes.

But a woman who made herself one of them, who worked where men, and such men as they, worked, who must perforce hear now and again rough speech, strive as they would to be careful!

What manner of woman was she?

And yet—the three small children who fawned upon her virgin breast and throve upon her care!

There had been wild speculation concerning these, and so tense a curiosity that Bob McGee,

ever its devotee, had once more elected to satisfy it.

And so, meeting her in the open street, this rollicking red-shirt with the flaring beard had stopped to chuck small Hester under the chin, to poke a dirty finger in the baby's little cheek.

There was not lacking the usual background of interested onlookers. They were always in the offing when Sandra Dehault appeared.

"Purty children, ma'am," he said heartily, "dam' purty. Excuse *me,* lady. I hain't spoke to a real one in so dam' long I sort of forgit my manners."

Sandra laughed.

"What do manners count when the heart means right?" she said.

"Shore. You're right. Dead right. An' what's their name?"

"Their name's Gephart," said Sandra, still smiling pleasantly.

McGee shuffled on his booted feet, but curiosity was stronger than natural decency.

"Ah! That their father's name?" he asked.

The smile died on the girl's face. The curved lips straightened, the long eyes narrowed.

"It was their mother's too," she snapped, and turning, walked away. But the tips of her ears beneath the wound braids were fiery red.

This was a price she had not thought of paying for her given servitude, and it went down hard.

But such things were small compared to the

great happiness which attended her daily life, namely, the walk home from the gulch, the three small faces glued to the western pane, the glow of the fire in its cavernous place carefully railed off, and the emptying of the day's treasure from the buckskin poke, first upon the table that the little ones might admire and touch, and then into the stone jar on the mantel.

This cabin! What did it not mean to her? This sweet, clean place, rough to be sure, and simple in construction, with its pole rafters frankly showing and its hearth laid of stark stones. Its beds were built against its walls, after the fashion of the prospectors' cabins, laced with cord to hold the precious bedding, and it was chinked with earth.

But at its windows hung the coloured chintz from the horsehair trunks, upon its floors lay several new-tanned skins—proffered gifts which she had refused but bought—upon its shelves stood plates of rare beauty, two candlesticks which had come from France and had once lighted a king's feast flanking magnificently the jar upon the mantel, while exquisite damask shone whitely on the hand-made table.

Here was her kingdom, here her heart's paradise. Here, with the rain and the night shut out, she retired to the curtained privacy of the northwest corner and presently emerged a different creature from head to toe.

Gone were the red shirt and the striped

trousers, hung to one side of the hearth to dry for the morrow, gone were the well-worn boots and leather belt. In their stead was a soft dark dress of fine merino, buttoned primly up the front to where the collar rolled from the tanned throat, the full skirt gathered at the waist and falling modestly to the ankles, where the straps of low-heeled slippers crossed and buttoned. Over this a snowy apron with ruffled shoulder straps was tied, and the Amazon had become the Penelope.

Then it was that Sandra Dehault shone like a flower in a lighted garden, going about her lovely tasks of cooking at the hearth, of feeding her babes, of solacing the loneliness of the long day without her, of setting forth on the white table the precious china and of caring for it meticulously when the meal was done.

And it was then that she was happiest, when, drawing to the hearth the stout small rocker which had ridden every foot of the long way from Missouri, she sat therein in delightful comfort and took the wee ones in her arms.

The babe was growing now. The milk of the cow was rich and health-giving, agreeing perfectly with the wizened body. The tiny face was rounding out its piteous hollows, there were no longer dark shadows beneath the big blue eyes, and a little golden down was covering the erstwhile heavy head.

This child was not yet named, and Sandra had begun to think about the matter seriously.

It was a sweet small creature, now that it had learned to smile, with a cunning habit of burrowing its infinitesimal nose into Sandra's neck, and the girl took a deal of joy therefrom.

But there was scarce room for Connie now in the hollow of her lap, and Hester must needs sit very close to keep her sister from sliding, sleepy-headed, to the floor.

And so they sat before their own hearth-fire, close and warm and happy, and Sandra, who had a singing voice as sweet as harp-strings, crooned endless melodies to the fire's crackling.

They feared nothing, either temporal or spiritual, and had no thought of the windows—to the sunrise and the sunset.

And so it was that, on many a night when the rain dripped and the four black horses stepped and moved in the lean-to made of the schooner's canvas cover securely stretched over a frame of poles, hungry eyes watched from the darkness this most beautiful of scenes.

Many a man, woman-hungry, felt the heart in his bosom calm and sadden at the sight of the sleeping babes, the woman's black head resting on the chair's high back, her dusky lashes sweeping her fire-lit cheeks and her smiling lips opening roundly in her lullaby.

From these nocturnal observances the speech about her subtly changed.

"Durn my eyes!" swore a man from Gold Run,

"she's *good!* Never make me believe anything else!"

"Yes," said Angel Allie, smoothing her meekly parted hair, "she was in here for quite a while the other day. Asked Sister to come to see her when she got settled."

" 'Yes,' " mimicked the other, "and what of that? I make no doubt it wouldn't hurt either her or Sister."

Satan's Sister, passing, stopped and glanced at the speaker with her hard and bitter eyes.

"Thanks, stranger," she said. "I—wonder."

The man was of a discerning mind and was quick to read her thought.

"There ain't no woman, Sister," he said gravely, "but what's white at heart—not none."

The dance-hall woman blinked her painted lids, and Angel Allie laughed.

Dan Clehollis, standing some distance apart, caught the silver tinkle of that laugh and pricked up his ears. Just so had Allie laughed one night at a Mexican *fiesta,* and a man's life was doomed. Hatred and desire and ability to accomplish her ends—these Clehollis knew of her. Hitherto they had commanded in him a deep and admiring respect. Now, for some new reason, they made his small eyes narrow with speculation as he looked at her.

More than once in the last month he had found himself wishing that this small woman was not so elemental in her loves and hates.

He was soon to have more food for thought along that line.

On a night some ten days later, when the soft rain sifted over all the jumbled hills and a thousand camp lights twinkled in the valley, the Rough and Ready roared with its accustomed life.

Kerosene lamps under huge reflectors radiated their yellow light over the lay-outs, the bar with its fine mirrors giving back its sparkling glasses, the laughing, drinking, gambling mass of reckless humanity. Towards the far end of the room there was a wide, clear space where men in heavy boots danced on the pine floor, mostly with each other, though Daisy Dean and Angel Allie were in constant demand, while Sister at the piano on the dais played with great skill and spirit. The room was blue with smoke, reeking with the smell of raw liquor, taken neat. At the many round canvas-covered tables men played poker, mainly draw, with stacks of chips before them and bags of gold flung carelessly at their elbows.

On every table stood a thick glass goblet partly filled with "dust." As the night advanced these goblets would be filled, collected by the waiters, emptied into Dan Clehollis' great buckskin poke, which hung, open-mouthed, at one corner of the bar, and returned to the tables.

They were the first progenitors of the cash-register, the quick-and-easy method of payment for refreshment, and it was significant of the

honesty of the times that they stood all day and all night unmolested.

The players, with their whisky glasses always at hand, drank, beckoned a waiter, put a pinch of gold dust in the goblet, and drank again. Always this gold was in the form of "dust," the finer particles which could be pinched conveniently between thumb and finger, and a pinch constituted the price of a drink.

A pinch was a "bit," and later came to be the common designation of the silver coins beneath a dollar, "two-bits" for a quarter, "four-bits" for fifty cents, "six-bits" for seventy-five.

Here was gathered a motley crowd. There were men from everywhere. They came from Thompson's Dry Diggings on their way out to the river towns, laden with gold; they came up from San Francisco and Sacramento eager for its magic touch; they were coarse and common, refined and intelligent, good and bad and indifferent. But over all of them had fallen the mantle of looseness, of excitement, of irresponsibility. So they played and won and lost, staked their all and whooped with laughter at either turn of fortune.

And into this moiling maelstrom on that rainy night walked Sandra Dehault with her baby on her arm and her heavy buckskin poke swinging by its thongs upon her wrist.

She was clad in her man's habiliments, with a long thick cape flung back from her shoulders, and she lacked only a short sword on her hip, a plumed

hat on her head, to be her ancestral cavalier come back to earth. That gay, graceful, insouciant ghost who lived in her bold blood and made her do unheard-of things, but who gave her also strength and happiness and the priceless gift of great courage.

If a celestial voice had cried the knell of doom upon them no sharper silence could have fallen on the place.

Hands were arrested with their cards unplaced, glasses stopped midway to bearded lips, astonished eyes bulged from gaping faces.

The girl, smiling, stood and surveyed the scene. Her eyes were shining with the venture, excitement flushed her healthy cheeks, her lips were parted over the teeth that made of her red mouth a snare of beauty.

"Gentlemen," she said clearly, "I never saw a gambling game in all my life, but—I have come to play. Will someone show me how?"

Would they show her how!

Every game in the Rough and Ready was disrupted upon the instant. The mass became a mob. The dancing ceased, the drinks were left untouched, and men on the outskirts climbed on chairs and tables to see over their fellows' heads.

And into the centre of this went Dan Clehollis, straight as a die. He cleared a space about the faro lay-out, bowed like a courtier, drew out a chair directly across from the dealer, and bade the new-comer be seated.

Sandra loosed her cape, and a dozen eager hands reached for it.

"I'll hang it up, miss," said Texas Tom eagerly, and walked, peacock-proud, to the farther wall, where he made ado of spreading the wrap upon three nails that it might dry in the heated air.

The child, frightened at the ring of faces, set up a whimper, and Sandra, looking around, met the dark eyes of Satan's Sister. Without a word the one woman held out the babe to the other, and blushing from her shamelessly low bodice to the roots of her hair, the dance-hall woman took it. Sandra promptly forgot them both as she drew a long breath and laid her poke upon the table's edge. The lay-out had been full before, but a man had stepped away when Clehollis laid his hand upon the chair.

The gambler, clever and suave, waved a hand at the crowding ring.

"Will someone stand by Miss Dehault," he asked, "and show her how to place her bets? It is not my place to do so."

A hundred men longed to push forward, but something held them back. What it was they could not have said. Perhaps it was the mystery attendant upon this strange woman, perhaps it was the calm assurance of her bearing, the impersonal look of her eager eyes. At any rate the silence deepened and Clehollis beckoned the sheriff.

A little awkwardly Hayden Shard came forward, took off his hat and said:

"At yore service, ma'am."

And so, in painful gravity, the interrupted game opened once more, while the tension lessened with the familiar sight of the cards coming face up from under the dealer's skilful fingers.

For a time all was regular.

Sandra, under Shard's direction, placed and lost a time or two, three men won, and the case-keeper's buttons rattled at their count.

And then Clehollis, walking about, brushed carelessly against the dealer's back. A little later from farther away he caught the case-keeper's eye.

Later still he glanced at the look-out on his stool.

And so Pitt Larson, the dealer, a small, white-lashed-and-moustached Swede, as clever as a demon with his fine fingers, began a subtle process which had to do with the "sand tell" among his cards—and the girl began to win. Not steadily, or with such regularity as to seem suspicious, but now and again, and when her bets were small.

As she saw the gold swept to her the sparkle in her eyes heightened. A little laughter began to catch at her lips, making them tremulous. They were mobile as smoke, changing in expression with each turn of the golden tide, now closed and pensive when she lost, parted and grave as she leaned forward, breathless, and again drawn

smooth above her teeth when she won; and it was then that they were adorable, every curve standing out with prominence in this wide-lipped laugh. Men, watching, held their breath with wonder at this woman's great beauty, and more than one resolved that night to own her or fight to the last ditch in the attempt.

And foremost of these was Clehollis, chewing his cigar, his thumbs in the arm-holes of his beflowered waistcoat.

At ten o'clock of that rainy night Sandra Dehault pushed the damp hair from her forehead and looked up at the ring of faces. She seemed to see them as from a distance, to come back to the present from some far place. There was gold before her—heaps of it, dull, tragic stuff that ran in her blood with passion. She pushed her hands among it, filled her palms with it. She sighed and smiled. She was thinking exultantly of her dreams.

"This," she said, "this—passing on the Road. And I have taken it! I shall take more—more. Oh, what shall I not take? Everything!"

"Eh?" said McGee, behind her. "What say, ma'am?"

"Nothing—to you," she said flatly. "I—was talking to myself, gentlemen. A bad habit, is it not? Mr. Clehollis, will you weigh my precious winnings?"

"Two thousand six dollars and a little over," the gambler said clearly when the scales had been

duly brought. "I congratulate you, Miss Dehault. You are a lucky player."

Sandra rose and took the gold in eager hands. "My cape?" she asked. "My baby?"

Texas Tom came pompously with the one—he would have fought to a finish any attempting to usurp the privilege—and when Satan's Sister brought the other from the hinter regions of the Rough and Ready the child was sleeping soundly and the woman's painted cheeks were strangely streaked.

"I think," said Dan Clehollis, "that, with so much money on you, miss, you had better let me take you home. It's not quite safe."

Sandra laid the babe in against her shoulder, adjusted her cape, and smiled.

"No," she agreed, "it's not—for any who might stop me. I thank you—but I walk alone. Good night, gentlemen. I'll come again, if I may. It is a wonderfully entrancing game, this faro, and quicker than the digging."

And so she left them no wiser than before.

The rain was still falling and the little one stirred beneath her cape, and the woman walked slowly in the dark. Her heart was beating roundly with the joy of this new experience, the rollicking heart that must take of all life offered at its high tide of adventure. She did not know that a man walked some distance behind her all the way, halting only when her own door opened to receive her, or that he struck his hands together in a sort

of despairing anguish as he swung back and disappeared in the darkness toward the small new cabins of the Craigs and Prints on the flat below.

Jason, faithful as her shadow in his silent heart.

CHAPTER XIII

TODDLE AND WADDLE, INC.

The stone jar on Sandra's mantelpiece was getting very heavy. Day by day she lifted it, shaking it up and down in her strong hands. To any watching she might have seemed obsessed with the lure of its contents, as indeed she was.

For what else had she filled the horsehair trunks back on the lone silt-land plantation, bought her stout schooner, harnessed the pick of her dead father's horses and set her face toward the Great West? For what else had she driven every long foot of the journey? The journey whose every dawn and noon and sunset had been a rapture?

Gold!

That arbiter of destinies, the blessing and the curse of all mankind!

She loved it for its own dull beauty, for what it represented of toil and achievement, and for what it would some day buy.

Land—and trees—orchards, she would tell herself, shaking the jar and setting a goal to every clink, fields—and a house, a very big house—horses and cattle in the levels—and the great hills rimming all! Then silks and velvets from

the ships at San Francisco—shoes with jewelled buckles—and a hundred precious books. Ten years—and the babes would be going to a school, perhaps in Sacramento. There would be all such things then. Their mother and their father, poor dreamers robbed by death of all their plans, she had promised them in spirit that night on the Trail to do her best for these, their hostages, and so she must have gold, much gold.

And she was getting it.

The claim in the gulch on Middle Creek was rewarding her for every day, every hour of her hard man's work. She was very busy, and she had no time for fretting over the fact that she had met Mrs. Print and the two Craig women face to face in the open street and they had turned their heads away. The Reverend himself spoke to her, though with a restrained dignity. Jason came now and again to see if there was aught he could do for her, standing painfully on the stone step, turning his hat in embarrassed hands. She had spoken to no woman in seven weeks, save and except Satan's Sister at the Rough and Ready. And yet, despite all this, she was happy to the soles of her worn boots.

One day a week she laid off pick and flat-pan to scrub and scour the shining cabin to yet greater brightness, and on such days, especially if the sun shone, her rich voice could be heard as far down into the camp as the Bull Baker store singing

some melody of the plantations half across the world.

The pure, care-free music of it drew men like a magnet, and thrice she had sent some bolder spirit about his business with a tongue as sharp as a two-edged sword.

But not for ever was this to serve her purpose. She was too beautiful to long hold off the ring of waiting wolves with such a slender weapon. She feared no one, however, counting herself as good a man as any, and she had good foundation for her courage in the strength and fitness of her tall body with its leanly muscled arms, its toil-hard fists, its long legs and narrow hips. And she had something more—an art of self-defence.

So she swaggered now at her business of looking on that passing world, searching for its best. Already she had begun to take of gold and gambling—barely begun. She would take much more of these, for she liked both. She would take of work and boldness, of chance and adventure, for, she argued to herself, why should she not have all these things which pulled at the heart of her with irresistible power, providing she was able to get them?

Because she was a woman?

Bah? Did not the good God make both man and woman and set them, equal, among the joys and blessings of His marvellous creation?

Why, then, should not each take what he wanted, simply and without apology?

She wanted gold—and lands—and fine raiment —and love.

And she knew in her heart she would get them all.

So she settled herself by the Great Road which ran to the Oregon country to watch its flowing stream.

Somewhere on that road would come a man—one man of all the multitude. One man—*her* man!

But always when this thought came to her, as it did with each new day, she saw the streets of Sacramento on the river's lip and the fair head of a man talking beside the train's camp-fires. "His eyes," she told herself, "were steady and deep and grave, with a little light of laughter burning in them far back—and his cheek was—it was—to my mouth. What was it to me? A provocation and a thrill that made me long for his lips instead!

"And still," she preened herself, "I forewent that fulfillment when he ran by my wagon in the street! I could have had it."

She nodded airily to herself.

"I could have had it. Yes. But I am glad I did not take it—for if I had, all the lips of men which I shall touch hereafter would have been dust and ashes, flavourless. Of that I am sure. And what is one man when one may choose from the thousands who will pass north with the spring?"

But she was not to wait for spring. There were

thousands already at her elbow, and they were getting bolder—the ring was closing in.

On a clean blue day when a little wind had blown the clouds across the tops of the Shasta Range and a fresh bright sun was shining, she went with a slender poke of her precious gold to the stores for provisions. Usually when she moved in the hectic town she had with her one or another of the little ones. They were, somehow, a badge of honour, a password of purity.

But this day she needed flour, at a dollar a pound, and beans and sugar and the good salt pork which came all the way from the East in ships, and must have her hands unhindered.

She stood in Burson's small emporium and looked around.

There were many men there and some few women, the latter in full cloth skirts and narrow buttoned waists, with wide scoop hats of straw, for though it was winter and the stores but a step from their cabins, the scattered women of Reading's Flat lost no opportunity to wear such finery as they possessed. Perhaps it was the love of clothes itself, or it may have been the vast and admiring male audience which was never lacking, which actuated them, but they vied in their simple preening. Some of these women were wives and mothers, some were of less certain standing, but one and all they looked coldly at Sandra Dehault in her red shirt and leather belt, her boots and

striped trousers. And Sandra looked back with amused and smiling eyes.

"Pouf!" she told herself, "small fry, little hens with hen souls. And they are not beautiful, not a single one of them. *They* could never pick and choose."

She bought her provisions, paid for them, watching alertly while Burson himself weighed her precious "dust" in the little dirty scales that stood upon the counter.

She was heavily loaded, with her flour on her shoulder, and her bright face was a little lifted as she passed out upon the rough plank porch. Going down the steps she must pass through a group of miners coming up. They were swinging up at a charge, laughing, and they had been drinking heavily.

Sandra stepped modestly aside, but as they reached her level, one, more drunken than the rest, flung out an arm and caught her round the waist.

"Texas Tom's Madonner!" he laughed. "Red cheeks an' lips an' hair as black's a crow! Ben wantin' t' kiss her ever sence I first laid eyes on her!"

And before the girl, astonished beyond measure, could move, this bearded ruffian had suited the action to the word.

For a moment Sandra stood as if petrified. Then the flour slid from her shoulder, she stooped and laid her bundles down. Her face was flaming and

the long black eyes were narrowed to angry slits. But she had no need to settle with this usurper.

Before she had fully straightened a slim form had catapulted from somewhere, and Texas Tom was upon him with fist and foot.

Burson was cleaving his way through. Two other men surged in, and the drunken miner went down in the smother.

There ensued a lively moment when the howls of the transgressor came out in muffled force and a crowd came running like ants.

Also there came something else, one of the wide-skirted women who had been trading in the store, a veritable harridan who clawed at the fighters from behind, shrieking like a vixen, the wife of the tipsy victim of his own folly!

When the worst was over and this woman, blazing, had her erring spouse upon his uncertain feet, a ridiculous spectacle of blood and dirt, Sandra Dehault, the cause of it all, stood with lips beginning to draw back from her teeth with laughter. She put her hands on her lean hips and swayed with mirth.

"So," she said sharply, "he has wanted to kiss me ever since he first laid eyes on me! *Mon dieu*, madame, if I had a man with such loose desires I'd change his mind or kill him!"

"Hussy!" shrieked the woman. "Jezebel! Come to th' diggin's alone! Ain't there enough single men here but you must work your wiles on the married ones? I know about you—flirted with

th' captain of yore train—an' every other man you could git!"

"Liar!" laughed the girl. "I don't have to 'get' them. Look at your own—they seem to come without calling."

And she picked up her purchases, swinging up her flour sack with one brown hand where the muscles shone sleek beneath the skin, and went serenely down the remaining steps.

"I thank you," she said to Texas where he stood smoothing his tousled head, "that was pretty work."

A little later as she set her kettles boiling at her fire she stopped dead still in front of her open door. The long spoon dripped on the clean floor and Sandra stared as if fascinated. She brushed a hand across her eyes, blinked them shut for a moment, and opened them again. She shook her head and leaned forward, peering.

A strange object was coming up her path from the road beyond, an unbelievable object, a terrible figure of a man, a wide-bodied figure, swinging grotesquely from side to side, each side lifting high and rocking back and far over as the other side did the same, a figure whose two legs were set horribly far apart, whose swinging arms flailed with its progress, and which bore upon its wide shoulders two distinct and separate heads!

As the apparition neared the cabin the girl clutched her temples in sudden terror—she who feared nothing normal in all the world—while

Hester and Connie, shrieking, danced beside her clinging to her knees.

And then the creature spoke—with one head—was seconded by the other—and Sandra dropped her hands, gulped and swallowed.

"Don't be skeered, miss," it implored earnestly, swinging to the stone step and stopping, balancing perfectly on its grotesque legs, the flailing arms lifting in unison two nondescript hats from its dual heads, "you ain't seen us before an' folks is apt to get a shock at first sight. We don't blame 'em, not none a-tall. We ain't a mite sensitive. But let me interduce ourselves. My name's Waddell—accent on th' last sillible, ma'am—an' this here's my pardner, Todd."

"John Todd, at yore service, miss," chimed in the right-hand half, but the other side silenced him with a slight shake.

"We're miners, like yoreself, Todd an' me, up on Clear Crik, an' doin' fairly well—an' have ben together for nine year comin' June. Todd havin' lost his left leg by a blast, an' me havin' got my right smashed in a mill, why, when we met up in Illinoy we invented this here harness which holds us together an's better nor any crutch ever made. We do a dance now," he went on with an access of pride, "which same we've ben a-givin' in every dance hall this side of Yerba Wayner, an' which, if I do say it myself, is th' only one of its kind extanter an' brings us many a honest dime an' dollar. But that ain't what we come to say, which

same matter has got to do with what took place up yan a while ago. We was witnesses to Bill Dyke's kissin' you unasked an' uninvited on Bunt Burson's porch, an' we considers that you need a bodyguard. Now Todd here can throw a knife best in the world——"

"Can pin a fallin' leaf to a tree trunk, ma'am," said Todd, "with a four-inch blade an'——"

His partner cut in briskly:

"This here man's town don't know a lady when it sees one, an' Dyke ain't th' only yeller cur what's watchin' fer his chanct at you. We ain't here often, ma'am, but when we are we'll be glad to escort you wherever an' whenever you may need our services, an' in th' interim Todd here'll be more than glad to learn you th' ancient an' manly art of knife-throwin' so you can fix any dam blackguard"—the speaker blushed from his grizzly beard to the round shining dome of his broad bald head in painful consciousness of the slip, but went bravely on—"any mistaken pup what thinks he kin kiss a lady when she ain't willin' an' has so specified."

The dead earnestness of the speaker, the serious expression of the two old faces, was proof positive of the words, and Sandra Dehault, quick in the uptake, pushed her children aside, laid down her spoon, and coming out on the stone held out her two hands, one to each.

"How can I thank you, gentlemen," she said, with tremulous sweetness, "for this chivalry?"

"Eh?" said Waddell.

"You champion me," she smiled, "like the knights of old—you believe in me! I think," she added naïvely, "that I shall make a good—a very good—knife-thrower, and I shall be only too glad to learn. This country does seem to demand more of its people than ordinary, I find."

"We're goin' home this afternoon, an' we won't be in again till next week, but ef you need us before then, ma'am, just send Texas Tom out to Clear Crik an' we'll sure come a-foggin'. Jest speak th' name of Todd an' Waddle, ma'am——"

"Toddle an' Waddle, miss, to be egzack," spoke up the other, a slimmer, more sober, but fully as bald and bearded a man as his partner. "Toddle an' Waddle, Inc., is what they call us mostly."

Mr. Waddell blushed with embarrassment.

"Ain't that a shame, ma'am?" he asked earnestly. "Waddle! When it's Wad*dell*—accent on last sillible—as plain as th' nose on your face. I leave it to you—ain't it just a livin' shame?"

CHAPTER XIV

FRIENDSHIPS AND WARNINGS

Sandra Dehault was already notorious.

Her fame was spreading to the north among the mining camps. The pack-train drivers told of her at Yreka and Weaverville—a woman of the dance halls who yet was not such. A woman who gambled with a mounting fervour, who went from game to game, playing with astounding "winner's luck," and who often sat in with a child asleep across her knees!

She was called far and wide the Madonna of the Mines, and men bid eagerly to hold the babe a few coveted minutes.

It was always the little one that Sandra took at night to the Rough and Ready, the tiny one who was too young for knowledge or for memories. Hester was never seen except upon the streets in daylight. Connie, too, she left at home a little more.

And she was getting rich.

Three times she had taken the stone jug to the small pine office of Grim and Rumbler, Express Company, had left its precious contents and received a receipt.

Also she had cleaned the sixteen feet of claim

on Middle Creek and moved with the rest a mile and a half farther on.

The excitement of the times was in her intensified a hundredfold. She was drunk with its lure, living it out to the last fine thrill.

And she was watching men. She knew the adoration of Texas Tom, and treated him like the love-sick boy he was; was pityingly aware of Jason Craig, and glanced appraisingly over the mobs who would have doormats for her had she given them the faintest gleam of encouragement.

But one and all of these remained—the mob.

Always she was looking over their massed heads for someone else. Often she stood at her sunrise window where the Road went by and looked down its reaches, worn by the wheels of adventure. What it was she expected to see she did not know—a man, true, but what manner of man? Dark and tall, bold as a lion, or mild and gentle, fair and small?

She did not know.

But once and again she saw in these dreamy reveries a slim, straight rider on a mettled horse who came riding easily, hands folded on his broad Spanish pommel and wide hat set a bit askew on his fair head. A man who, talking beside a campfire had not forgotten the hungry women listening for news of a new world—a man with heart as well as mind.

Then she would shake herself and smile and say

to herself: "I hope he does not come soon—for I must look at many others."

One other was much in her vision of late, not of her own will, but by his persistence, his smiling and suave kindness in all ways, his clever manipulation of circumstance—Dan Clehollis.

Dan Clehollis, who sent her gifts of cloth and fine tanned skins, of this and that brought from the towns below, and who was not discouraged by her steady refusal to accept them. Dan Clehollis, burning with the passion of his checkered life.

Any word of hers was law with him. She had but to express a wish and it was done. As on the night when Satan's Sister laughed on her stool at the piano, swaying like a drunkard, and Clehollis made her play.

"I'm tired, Dan," the woman said jerkily. "Drat me, but life is rotten at this place!"

"You'll think so if you don't pull music from that instrument for the next six hours," said the boss evenly.

"Please," said a sliding voice behind him, "I want to take her home with me a while. I think she's ill."

Whirling like a shot, the man saw Sandra Dehault with her baby on her hip. She had come in unnoticed and had walked behind him down the hall. The cold eyes flamed in his mask-like face and he bowed elegantly.

"You may take the Rough and Ready home with

you, Miss Dehault," he said, "and everything that's in it, if you choose."

Sister on her stool looked at them with her great dark eyes set in their dusky circles. The round, handsome face had thinned in the cheeks. A feverish spirit was burning the flesh from her, it seemed. Sandra held out her hand, and this time the woman took it.

"You're sure you don't care?" Sandra asked. "That you'll not be hard on her—after?"

"You have my word," he said.

And so, waiting only to get her cloak from the regions behind, Satan's Sister went home to the cabin on the western slope and sat in the precious rocker while Sandra sat in the small one on the floor and stirred the coals on the hearth to leaping flames.

At first there was restraint between them, with Sister's weary head resting on the chair's back, the fine white hands lying on its arms. Sandra swung her crane to the heat and hung a kettle from its hook. The unnamed babe crawled to Sister's feet and contentedly rolled down with its sleepy head across one red satin shoe. The tragic eyes of the woman turned down upon the innocent, and presently two bitter tears crept from under the shadowed lids and ran down her cheeks.

"Men," said Sandra simply, "and life are hard on women. It is only the good God who understands. And sometimes—another woman."

Without warning the other suddenly bent for-

ward with her face in her hands and fell to weeping. Sandra sat down on a low stool and laid her arm across the bowed shoulders in their spangled satin gown.

"Cry, *chérie,*" she said gently, "cry hard. It will do you good."

It seemed as if the floods of years, pent up, had broken bounds and this hard and brilliant-eyed woman were drowned therein.

So long she wept, drearily, hopelessly, that the kettle boiled and sang, and Sandra got a little blue pot from her shining shelves, took tea from a canister that had come with the candlesticks from France, and pulled the table near. She poured the fragrant stuff in a cup of ancient lustre and filled another for herself.

"Come," she coaxed, "there's nothing in this world like steaming tea. It is sweet and honest, clean as the winds in March, and it holds healing. The drink of friends—I am your friend."

Sister wiped her swollen face and took the beautiful old cup in shaking hands.

"You—don't dare, Miss—Dehault," she said. "You are already skating—on—thin ice. To befriend me would be to break through yourself."

"Dare?" said Sandra. "Woman, I dare do anything I choose in this round world."

"They'd have a hold on you, a reason."

"Pouf! What do I care for reasons?"

"But men—they'll win. They always win—with women."

Sandra waved an arm in a large and comprehensive gesture.

"Let them try," she said. "The heavier the fight the greater the glory. A woman is a human, same as a man. Shall any deny her right to virtue —to fortune and the way of life she chooses?"

"But the fight is never-ending," said Sister, "and they have many ways to beat one down. Oh, God! How many ways!"

Sandra's cheeks were getting red with quick excitement.

"I like men," she said. "They have, for the most part, been friends to me all my life. They are broader than women, more ready to believe if they have reason. Women, do you know, are cats, clawing each other at a breath. They hate me as a rule, have always hated me."

"Don't you know why?" asked Sister.

"Of course," said Sandra. "It's because men like me. I am a man's woman."

"Sure," said the other, "and every woman who looks at you sees danger in you."

"It's a throw-back to the Stone Age, when the life of the female depended—and that of her offspring, too—on the male. When a roving female hove in sight, blandishing before the cave-man at his doorway, his mate was ready to fly out and tear her in ribbons, and she was right. Only prompt measures would answer. I seem to be a roving female; only the day has changed, and I want no woman's man. Only my own, who shall

come to me some day on this same great road of life."

Sandra gazed in the leaping fire with pensive eyes, unaware of anything strange in that she was speaking for the first time her inmost thought and secret hopes—to Satan's Sister, of the Rough and Ready! But the dance-hall woman knew it, and swallowed at the lump which choked her.

"You're a good woman," she said thickly, "though all this camp is wondering, and half the country too. You are brave and kind, but this land will get you in spite of all, I know. Go away, Miss Dehault, before you lose these things—and —and all the rest that matters to a woman."

Sandra shook her head.

"I'll never lose them, *chérie,*" she said.

"Then you will break your heart," said Sister with finality.

The other rose and picked up the sleeping babe.

"I'll fix the beds and move Connie in with me, and you can sleep with Hester."

Sister rose sharply.

"No, oh, no!" she said. "I must go back to-night."

"You must not," said Sandra. "I wish you'd never go back."

"But already you have enemies here; this will make you more."

"Pouf! Enemies!"

"Yes. That preacher's wife, and the two Craig women, and Mrs. Dyke, and—one other."

"One other?" said Sandra, pausing with a pieced quilt in her hands. "Who?"

"Angel Allie."

"That little blond? Why?"

"Don't you know?"

"Not exactly—unless she loves Clehollis."

"Right. She does. And Clehollis wants you."

Sandra laughed again.

"That's unfortunate," she said, "for he doesn't look a bit like the man I picture."

"But he'll get you sooner or later if you stay here and continue to come to the Rough and Ready."

"Not alive—he'll never get me alive!"

"Then he'll kill you in the attempt."

"Sister," said Sandra quietly, "I'm a fighter, in several ways. I can break a common man's arm easily. I can drive nails with the fine duelling pistol in the third trunk yonder. And Messrs. Todd and Waddell—Toddle and Waddle, Inc.—are going to teach me the ancient and manly art of knife-throwing right soon. I'm not ready to quit yet. I haven't half enough gold, or excitement, or life in general. And Clehollis is amusing."

"Good God!" said Satan's Sister. "Clehollis *amusing!* He's a monster, with powers. I beg you to wake up to him. If you must play this unheard-of game with him and life, never turn your back to him."

"Thanks for the warning. And now I want you

to sleep—in a safe house—beside a child. Good night."

Satan's Sister was very right in her premise.

The bold eyes of men were bolder when next Sandra Dehault appeared on the street of Reading's Flat, and one, a handsome youth of some twenty-four or five, took to following her wherever she went. He was as dark, as rich and flaming with young beauty as she herself, and he was arrogant.

His name was Dick Favor, and he was a good gambler, a reckless, improvident roisterer, one of the strange brotherhood who toiled not, save and except when necessity demanded. Then he repaired, as did the rest, to the romantic spot at the south of town known as Gamblers' Gulch, and recouped his fortunes just enough to stake himself once more in a game of chance.

Gamblers' Gulch was sacred to its devotees. It was passing rich and easy of access. No honest miner touched it. No one worked in it for long at a time. Such procedure was against the strict and delicate ethics which ruled its operation. It was the open grub-stake for those irresponsible children of chance who could not keep what they won.

Young Favor dressed flamboyantly. He wore his low-crowned black hat at a rakish angle, and he fancied himself exceedingly. And, fixing his black eyes on this notorious woman, he laid out to impress her. He became her shadow. At first the girl smiled at this, shrugging her shoulders. Then,

as he persisted to an embarrassing extent, she grew nettled about it and turned on him sharply before a crowd in the Bull Baker store.

"Mister," she said clearly, "do I owe you anything?"

"Yes," came the answer like a snapped whip, "a kiss."

Sandra put her hands on her hips and surveyed him minutely.

Then she shook her head.

"I'm sorry, *monsieur,*" she said sweetly. "I have kissed men in my day, but they must have one qualification. They *must* be handsome."

At the roar which followed the Lothario blushed to the roots of his oiled dark hair and beat as hasty a retreat as possible.

"Beg pardon, miss," spoke up a bystander, "but ain't there nary a one of us could qualify? Take a good look at me."

"Gentlemen," she said, and the sweetness was gone from her tone, "I am a miner—a gambler if you will—an ordinary free citizen. Must I begin to pack a gun?"

Word of this encounter ran swift, as it did always concerning her, and Clehollis looked these two between the eyes.

"Miss Dehault," he said directly, "has no need to pack a gun. There are those who pack them for her."

"Yes," thought Angel Allie, standing behind a denim curtain, she had the trick of reptiles in slid-

ing where she wished to be, "there are so. There are so, Dan."

There was a small white line pinched in at the base of her childish nose, a depth in her blue eyes like waters under the press of impending winds. Her small hands, still as the dead, gripped her folded arms.

"Miss Dehault," said Texas Tom a few days later, fiddling nervously with his hat brim, "you —I—these devils ain't to be trusted. I can't say which an' who—but I wish—I wish——"

"Yes?" she said gently, "what do you wish, Tommy?"

"I love you!" blurted the boy with sudden passion. "Oh, can't you see? I'd follow you round th' world on my knees. I'd die fightin' for you! And it kills me—it does for fair—to watch these blackguards, knowin' what they think! There's room in the Oregon country—th' road 'll be opened sure by spring—the Indians are more friendly now. A man could make a home up there away from this dirty, roaring camp. A man —could take—his wife——"

He stopped in desperation, and Sandra took one of his hands in both her own, stroking it tenderly.

"Tom dear," she said, "dear, dear Tom! Dear lad! What more can a man say—what more could he do? I am honoured, and my heart is touched. I shall never forget this, never while I live. It shall be a treasure for my memory-box—some-

thing soft and sweet and sparkling, like dew on a flower in the very early day, something precious to take out and look at when I sit alone in summer twilights! But though I thank you, it could never be. Why I, *chéri,*" she concluded in wide astonishment, "am old, compared to you! Far, far too old! At least six or seven years! And I have my family; but I love you for the noble words."

And she pressed most caressingly the boyish hand she held, so that Texas Tom went away feeling like a man and a hero, and convinced that, had it been possible, the dream would have come true.

Sandra's heart was, as she said, touched. Also she felt as never before the force of the warning.

"He meant Clehollis," she told herself, lying awake in her narrow bed with the wee one's downy head snuggled in her armpit, "and that I know. But to the bad place"—she crossed herself, smiling—"with Clehollis. And he has wonderful games that are quicker than the digging. I'll send for Toddle and Waddle when next they come to town."

CHAPTER XV

THE RIDER ON THE GREAT ROAD

She was as good as her word, and it soon became a red-letter day for the I.N.C. whenever they rocked into Reading's Flat, for the lesson in knife-throwing, undertaken and carried out in utmost solemnity, was followed on each occasion by a meal in the polished cabin. To these poor bits of flotsam on the great sea of the West this was an unprecedented experience, the white cloth, the dishes of ancient beauty, the excellent tea and bread made with "everlasting" yeast being matters of solemn excitement.

The girl was at first distressed in that she had no chair broad enough to accommodate her guests, but Waddell assured her that she need not be, and promptly proceeded to illustrate by seating both himself and partner on adjoining stools and unstrapping the harness which made them one, after which each with his one leg shoved his stool to its proper place.

"You see, ma'am," he told her largely, "there ain't no desaster in this here life that can't be over-rid if a person has courage an' enterprize. Yes, ma'am, enterprize, that's th' mainspring o'

th' hull business, lock, stock an' barrel, so to speak."

Down in the moiling camp the partners were reservedly dignified concerning these weekly visits. Waddell did state to an interested audience, however, that they were the first and only he-people who had set foot in that cabin since its completion.

Whereat Bob McGee grinned, and Mr. Todd fiddled uncertainly with the knife in his belt.

"How d'you know ye be?" asked another, to which the partners replied with finality and one voice:

"She told us so."

They were right, though it was no fault of the masculine population. The lure of the uncovered windows had become so strong that twice on a night of rain visitors had come knocking on the barred door, only to be ignored to the utmost by the woman whose swaying chair did not miss a beat. She knew what all these things meant, and her cocksure heart laughed in her breast derisively.

"Not your kind, gentlemen," she thought to herself gaily, "will ever get by that lintel. You waste your time."

However, she was becoming vastly proficient with the two heavy-handled knives which Toddle and Waddle had made for her with painstaking art. These were stiff and narrow, having been ground from the hearts of two precious files, and

they were razor keen on their double edges. They were deadly small weapons, designed to slip neatly into anything soft enough to receive them, and there was considerable driving power in the weight of their carefully hung handles.

Also she had spent some time over the beautiful old duelling pistol which she took from its case in the third trunk. It lay alone in the worn black leather case with the purple velvet lining, though once a mate had curved around it. The sunk imprint of the other had been for forty years a reminder to that courtly man, Pierre Jacques André Dehault, who had brought his ruined fortunes to America, the man who had taught his only child to shoot and laugh and take what she chose from life.

It was a little later that she pinned a round bit of paper the size of a saucer to the big tree which stood on the slope below her cabin, and sitting in her doorway amused herself by shooting at it. This, of course, brought its audience instanter, a ring of men who watched the performance with closed lips and speculative eyes.

The virgin mark took on, slowly and evenly, a lovely lacework of scallops at its edge, each scallop, the exact size of the somewhat large ball in use in France a half-century earlier, delicately overlapping its predecessor a minute fraction. She took her time about this, raising the fine old gun with its pearl handle, gold inlaid, with evident pleasure, squinting a second, pulling the trig-

ger with a steady touch. When the whole of the circle was complete she studied it a moment, and then, as if with an after thought, put a true cross in the centre.

She hung the gun between her knees and smiled at the silent spectators.

"Tommy," she called pleasantly, "I'll give you that for a *souvenir,* something by which to remember me. You may show it to any who care to look. It is a symbol of supreme faith. I think we need to think, in this quick country, a bit more of such things."

By sundown the extraordinary bit of fancywork was known to every man in Reading's Flat, and when she sat at Clehollis' faro table next there was a difference in the atmosphere.

"I'll be damned ef she don't beat me!" said Bill Hardy of the Buzzard's Roost. "She's the first woman I ever laid eyes on that I couldn't figger out."

And a thousand others thought the same. Clehollis was not among them, however. He of all the town was serenely sure in his own mind, laid his plans accordingly.

"Women," he told himself, "are all alike under the skin. Some hold out longer against men, having their hundred different little schemes of life, but in the end they come. Always come. And to the strongest man. I'll give her what she wants. Just now it's gold."

So Sandra continued to win at the Rough and Ready.

The feverish excitement was in her blood, so that she went less and less often to the diggings on Middle Creek, and Clehollis saw her every time he could. Once he came to the cabin and talked with her upon its step, holding his hat in his hand with courtly deference; but she did not ask him in.

He took to walking beside her when she swung home among the crowds, and the miners grinned.

"How long," he said once, looking at her sidewise from narrowed eyes, "are you going to play this game, Miss Dehault?"

"What game do you mean, sir?"

"This game of equality with men? Are you not satisfied with your success?"

"If you think I'm not in earnest, Mr. Clehollis," she answered, "you are mistaken. I am playing for nothing but what every man here is playing for —money and the future."

"Surely. But you must know that the future, for a woman like you, a woman whose very presence drives men mad, must mean one thing—love. Love and a man."

Sandra laughed.

"Know it?" she said. "None better! I'm waiting for him now."

Clehollis bit his lips with a sudden violence.

"You know him? You've—met such a man?"

"I'm looking for him on the great road," she said evasively, "this road that runs to Oregon."

Suddenly the gambler reached and caught her hand, holding it tight in his own, drawing it downward and towards him, bringing her a trifle nearer.

"You need not look," he said, "for if he comes I'll kill him as surely as the sun shines."

The girl snatched her hand away, flung up her head, the deep red flush of anger pouring in her cheeks.

"And if you do," she said savagely, "I'll edge your heart with lace-work!"

Then she shook herself and laughed.

"Fools!" she said. "Fools that we are to trifle with tragedy, even in friendly banter. If we quarrel over shadows, Mr. Clehollis, how can I continue my apprenticeship at your delightful tables?"

The gambler caught on the instant her quick change of front, knew that she had been in the deadly earnest she so easily disclaimed. He knew also that it was gold that spoke, the born gambler striking for her tottering gods.

As quick and controlled as she, he too laughed.

"The lure of women," he said, "makes fools of men. And you are a super-woman—a love-woman—a star-woman—such a woman as has never been seen in this wild country. I'd give"—he swallowed with the emotion which really flooded him—"I'd give all I possess or ever hope to possess in this world just to hold you in my arms one hea-

venly hour, to put my lips in the little hollow of your throat! God, Sandra! Give it me some day!"

The girl shrugged her shoulders, spread her hands in an airy gesture, a little sly play which might be construed according to the mind of the beholder.

"Men," she thought to herself quoting Satan's Sister, "have many ways to beat a woman down. I'll let him ride to his own fall."

That night Sandra stayed in her cabin.

There was rain falling outside, soft white rain that swept the great country of the Trinities to the west and swung its shifting curtain east across the top of Lassen's Peak, the great pointed mountain which bore the name of Mr. Peter Lassen, and of which the Indians told strange tales.

The oldest Indians hereabouts said that once, when they were young men, this mountain had belched great pillars of smoke into the heavens, even up to where the sun rode at noon, and that at night the pillars were red with fire. Indians' tales, no more, weird fantasies built from the romancing of these simple people.

And yet Mr. Lassen, the sanest, quietest, most powerful man of that part of the country, said there might be truth in the tales, since over in the east there was a queer country made of miles of hard brittle stone which rung to a stroke exactly as if it had been fired. "The lava beds," he called it.

But who had time for such dull things when the diggings roared with their varied life and gold was to be had for the taking? Only he; and he had time for many things beside. It was he who brought the first Masonic Charter all the way from St. Louis, sewed in his leather vest, and hung it proudly in the new building on the east side of the street beside the jail. Satan's Sister had told her all about this, and Sandra had looked with interest at the modest temple. She had looked with interest, too, at Mr. Lassen when Texas Tom pointed him out to her, a rather short, heavily built man, bearded and of a grave demeanour, with a great pipe always between his lips.

She had nodded sagely, considering him.

"He has visions," she had said to herself, "of a far-off future when this mad country will be ordered. He looks down the same stretch which that Captain Sutter sees, with his fort and his plans and his unfailing kindness to the incoming trains. Yes, such men as these *make* a country—make it."

So she swung contentedly in her rocking-chair and thought of these solid and pleasant things, while the rain dripped and her three babes drowsed about her. There was a deep fire on the hearth, heavy and red, and she saw therein many pictures.

These came and passed and came again, and finally, half-asleep herself, she was conscious of a horseman riding across the flaming field, a slim, straight figure whose hands were folded on a

broad pommel, whose hat was tilted a bit above its steady eyes. Instantly her lips parted, her drowsy eyes shone, she sat bolt upright to the stirring unease of small Connie on her knee.

"The rider!" she whispered. "He's on the Road, coming north! I knew it! Oh—Life—and Love—and Gold! But," she finished with comical consternation, "he comes too soon! Not yet have I seen any from whom to chose—I have kissed no man other—why, there has been no other!"

From that moment the girl watched more eagerly the muddy road that ran to the south, believing in her heart that the mysterious rider was indeed upon it. And she was right in this strange certainty.

Stanton Halliday slept that night on the little boat *Jack Hayes,* which was the first craft to navigate the Sacramento river as far north as Red Bluff, and on the morning following he hired a good horse and set forth in the never-ceasing rain towards the diggings.

He rode easily, hands crossed on his pommel, with care for his animal in the selection of footage, and he wore a Mexican *poncho* over his clothes, a piece of oiled cloth, some four feet square, with a hole in the centre through which to thrust the head. He carried little money with him. His saddlebags were heavy with grain for his horse and some bread and dried meat for himself. On top of these rode a roll of blankets, under

which he would sleep with the *poncho* spread over all.

This was an unpleasant journey, what with the rain and the snow which was due in the mountain country and might be encountered any time, not to mention the loneliness. But he was inured to hardships and there was no aspect of this virgin land which did not find in him an answering chord of harmony.

He saw beauty in slanting sheets of rain against the hills, in sunlight above the conifers, in wisps of fog that trailed across them like silver veils of mystery.

The country was changing swiftly.

With Red Bluff he left the wideness of the Sacramento Valley and began to go between constantly indrawing hills.

He travelled late, made camp beside one of the huge boulders which were here in profusion, built a great fire near which he tethered his horse after rubbing him down as well as the circumstances would permit.

He was a lone figure, sitting with arms clasped around his booted knees, and he had much to occupy his mind. There was a strong prospect of extending his business activities in the North with tremendous profit, and he thought gravely about details of transport, drivers and stock. He thought, too, about the fabled richness of this region, of the mushroom camps that flared into

life at a whisper, of the mining methods which were improving fast.

This year with the constantly increasing number of immigrants the rich surface was being swept away at a rapid rate. No longer was a mining claim held by the simple expedient of leaving a tool standing in the hole, and the old custom of "nothing deeper than a spade handle" was passing. The "long tom" was supplanting the shorter and less efficient cradle, and sluices were coming in to push the "tom" aside. Men were beginning to grasp the astounding magnitude of the gold deposits of the country, to prepare for a more widespread and intelligent exploitation.

Then he fell into a reverie concerning home—and the fair face of The Golden Lily. It was true of him then that his heart was honest. That night he was as simple in his intents and purposes as a man might be, planning for his future with the woman of his choice, sincere, upright, honourable.

What disaster waited for him ahead was mercifully hidden, what fires of passion, what brinks of death, what pitfalls of dishonour.

It was true of him also that, while he had asked John Lightfoot about the woman Sandra Dehault, he had sternly put out of his mind the picture of her flaming face beneath its banded hair, the memory of her lips soft and moist and warm against his cheek.

If the knowledge of her presence at Reading's Flat was in his mind, it was innocently there.

So he slept presently in the lee of the boulder with his fire at his feet and dreamed of the brown river running full and of Lilian Grey standing on its lip with her hands clasped on her breast and her fair face lifted to a clouded sky. There was in the sweet face such despairing anguish, such a look of tragedy, that Halliday sat upright awakened by the horror of the dream. He found his forehead damp with sweat, so real and terrible had been the vision.

The rain had cleared and there were stars on the deep steel-coloured sky. It lacked little of dawn, and he rose, renewed his fire and set about the simple preparations of his morning meal. The horse, a splendid fellow, whinnied, shaking his heavy mane and stamping impatiently for his feed.

With the first red streak in the east horse and rider took the road. It was a broad road, well defined, though the washing rains had laid it deep in ruts. It was a great road, a road of history, a road of empire, this lonely trace winding up the Valley of the Sacramento. Over it had come these first hordes of the gold seekers. Over it would come with another spring the settlers.

Oregon at the north was waiting. Waiting with its great Willamette valley, its fertile land, its snowclad peaks, its wealth of beauty unsurpassed in all the world. Already Mr. Applegate had settled near the coast and his name had filtered south.

Halliday, riding at an easy running-walk, was

enjoying the new day of sun after rain, and had made a matter of some five or six miles when, coming sharply around a clump of willows beside a little stream, his horse, snorting with fright, suddenly leaped to one side almost unseating him.

At the edge of the runnel a man lay face down with his head in the water. Behind him was evidence of a camp, its small fire scattered and dead, its scant possessions cast here and there as if by a contemptuous hand. There was little left of what a traveller might be supposed to have, a saddle blanket, a coffee-pot, a gold-pan and small pick, also the trees of a pack-saddle.

But horses and provisions, saddle and bedding, these were gone. And the poor owner lay with his mouth filled with sand and a broad red splotch, darkened to russet, drying on the back of his flannel shirt. Murder had been done here, and Halliday looked sharply around with his hand upon his rifle before dismounting.

He took from the body what evidence of identity he could find—a leather pocketbook, rifled of its contents, a portion of a letter written in a running, fine hand, and a daguerreotype case in which were the pictures of a woman and a child—and wrapping the poor thing in his own blanket, buried it with infinite labour in the rise of the stream's bank, using for tools the pick and gold-pan.

It was noon before he was again on his way, having left as marker of the lonely grave the trees of the pack-saddle set at its head.

And it was mid-afternoon when, rounding another clump of willows, a horseman in the road ahead cried "Halt!" and he found himself looking down the bore of a very long rifle. Behind this a red handkerchief covered a face under a low-set hat-brim, and a slim figure sat tense in its saddle.

"Shell out!" rasped a voice. "An' do hit quick, mister!"

Without a word Halliday tossed his buckskin dust-poke to one side the road.

"Gun too."

The rifle followed the poke.

"Any grub in that thar saddle-pouch?"

Turning, Halliday unbuckled the bags and let them fall.

Then he looked at the man keenly. There was something vaguely familiar in the voice, or more rightly in the words themselves. Where had he heard a man say "hit"? And the eyes above the red mask of the kerchief—shallow, excited, pale brown eyes with pupils that spread and contracted with strange rapidity?

He thought fast in the pregnant moment, and out of the flashes of memory leaped the Stinking Tent, the tall dealer standing at his table, the reek of gunsmoke and a man swaying on heels and toes, biting his nails and whimpering with a gun dangling from his fingers!

He dropped his eyes to hide their sudden

change of expression and waited, hands on his pommel.

The robber moved his horse aside, waving him on with the rifle, and Halliday rode forward, expecting every second to be shot in the back. Throughout the whole encounter he had not spoken. As he drew away in safety he breathed once more.

"Jard Hasper!" he said to himself. "Outlaw and gun-man!"

CHAPTER XVI

A MEETING OF IMPORT

The one long street of Reading's Flat was witnessing a play, excruciatingly funny. Men stopped their occupations to watch and laugh.

Down the open way, padding painfully in the shallow mud, his meek shoulders bowed under the yoke that rode them, his huge baskets bobbing on either end, came an aged Chinaman. His wrinkled face was filled with fright. At every step he leaped grotesquely forward to escape the booted foot that met his rear anatomy. And behind him swaggered Bob McGee holding to the end of his long black queue which was plentifully springled with grey.

"Hi—yah! Hi—mucky—gee! Um! Pah!" yelled the bully, enjoying himself to the fullest extent, his beard flaring, his pig eyes silly with the liquor which was in him.

"Um! Ah! Phooey!"

At every other word he jerked the pig-tail, administered a kick.

The laden baskets bobbed and swung.

The populace doubled up with laughter.

The meek "chinks" were legitimate prey for all and sundry.

At the corner of the blacksmith-shop there lay a pool of muddy water. The miner jerked his victim towards it.

The spectators drew in a bit closer from all quarters, shouting with derision.

At the unusual noise a figure just rounding the corner beyond halted its long stride, turned to look, a tall figure in striped trousers and a red shirt, with a baby on its hip.

For a moment Sandra Dehault gazed back at what was taking place. Then a red flush poured up along her throat and into her face.

"Love of God!" she said indignantly. "Pigs! Rats! *Canaille!*"

She hesitated a second.

McGee, steering his victim near the puddle, aimed a kick at the right-hand basket. A cloud of garments, washed, ironed and mended with meticulous care by the Celestial, too old and feeble to get gold otherwise, flew high in the air and settled like a flock of birds in the dirty water.

"Whoo-oop! Whoop-ee!"

Sandra Dehault whirled like a Dervish. In three long leaps she had reached the scene. She dropped her babe unceremoniously on a folded blanket and never knew that she set it in three inches of mud. In two more jumps she was reaching for McGee with an outstretched arm.

As his booted foot came up, sending the other basket after its mate, a fist as hard as iron sank itself in the hairy cushion of his insolent beard,

and his head snapped back on his shoulders. Taken with one foot off the ground, the other promptly followed, and he went down with a resounding thud. Instantly the red-shirted figure was upon him, its knees in his doubled stomach, its fists flailing like pistons, its lips drawn back from its teeth, fighting like a demon.

The drunken, bewildered face pulped under the blows; the bully struggled ineptly to ward off this pounding, punishing whirlwind which had arrived out of nowhere, and the laughter of the audience changed into gaping astonishment.

"You—low-down—whelp!" said Sandra between her teeth. "Dirty—bullying—drunkard! If the—town'll let you—ride rough-shod—*I* won't!"

And she finished him up with redoubled fury.

When McGee rolled over with an arm shielding his sodden face, the girl rose, brushing her hands against each other. Her face was fiery red from brow to throat, lowering with unbridled rage.

"You're no better!" she cried, flinging an arm to include the crowd. "There's not a *man* among you. I'd like to pound you all! Laugh, fools! Laugh if you want, but I'll take it out of the first that does——"

She turned on her heel and stopped dead still, her arm arrested at the peak of its vehement gesture, her lips apart, the furious words aborted on them.

Her eyes, flaming with rage and temper, gazed straight into the astonished grey ones of a man on

a big bay horse, a slim man whose hat was tilted a trifle forward and whose hands were folded on the broad pommel of his saddle.

The rider on the Great Road. The man of thousands, the one of many who should come to her along the Oregon trail!

And he saw her first in pants, fighting in the open street, the centre of an interested throng. Oh, unspeakable!

She had not pictured it thus. Always she had seen herself greeting him on her own door-sill, asking him in, seating him by her lighted hearth, laying his hat away, giving him tea from her priceless cups, herself in the brown merino, the ruffled apron, the adored slippers with the crossed straps!

For a terrible moment she could say nothing, do nothing. A great lump rose in her throat, choking her with the grip of keen disappointment. Slowly the fury in her flaming eyes died down, and to save her life she could not help the feel of tears that stung them. Then, as suddenly as she had leaped to conflict, she snapped her fingers, looked at the old Chinaman, who was tremblingly gathering his despoiled laundry, picked up her dripping babe, and setting it astride her hip, marched away without a backward glance.

For once in her intrepid life Sandra Dehault was floored by circumstance.

And Stanton Halliday, looking after her, felt his blood leap along his veins as it had never done

before. The great beauty of her was made superb by the fire of her anger; the marching, tall figure was that of an outraged goddess. She seemed stronger, finer, trimmer and more physically splendid than his memory of that day in the late summer pictured her.

Twice he had seen her, and each time she had been in mortal combat. And yet, looking after her, as everyone else was doing, he was conscious of a strong feeling of contradiction, as if he had but seen the outer husk of her, the shell that wrapped the living seed of her spirit. He knew without conscious thought that that spirit was a priceless thing, a flaming, sweet treasure to set mad the heart that dared to tamper with it.

The new-comer repaired to the hotel, saw his horse well cared for, and hunting up Sheriff Hayden Shard, reported the murder he had discovered, turning over to the officer the poor treasures he had taken from the body. Also he told of the robber who held him up, and, giving his name and Mayor Richards's, made arrangements for funds to carry him on his interrupted journey north.

"Sure, Mr. Halliday," said Shard, "I know of you. Own the White Mule Pack Train out of Sacramento for Marysville, don't you?"

Halliday nodded.

"It's in the interests of my packing business that I'm going on to the northern mines," he said. "With the coming year this country's going to

see such a rush of immigrants as to stagger imagination. There'll be more than all the pack-trains in creation can supply. They'll be pouring up this road in a solid stream."

Sandra Dehault was in two minds. For the first time since she could remember she was ashamed of herself.

Not of what she had done. No. Given the same reason and opportunity, she would do the same again. She gloated wickedly over the good sound drubbing she had given the drunken bully, too sodden to save himself.

But that Stanton Halliday, of Sacramento, should have been a silent witness of the affair brought the blood flushing to her face. This man who had been slyly in her mind every day since she had first seen him sitting by Captain Light-foot's fire! This man with the steady eyes that seemed, somehow, to look deep into the heart behind one's face.

She stayed in her cabin that night, rocking in the little chair, and she wore, not the brown merino with its simple neatness, but a gorgeous purple delaine blooming over all its flowing folds with fresh pink rosebuds sprigged with green. A wide lace collar hung about the modest bodice fastened at its front with a brooch of cameo. The straps of her slippers stood out in high relief across the pale silk hose that covered her arching insteps.

So, clad in the vanity of fine raiment which the second horsehair trunk had given up, she rocked and sang to the little ones as usual; but all the time her exquisite ears were tuned to the night outside, listening for a step which she had no doubt would come, a hand that must in reason tap upon her door.

The linen shone on the table, the cups were ready on their shelf, and the kettle hummed on its crane.

Just so had she pictured this hour, save for the gladness of her garb. She had not thought that she would make such effort after beauty; and yet——

So she crooned and waited. Connie sprawled little plump knees towards the fire, and the unnamed breathed with soft baby lips against her bare throat. Hester, ever the last to sleep, slid her braided head down against her; and the fire burned low.

And all suddenly she knew—knew that all this had been in vain, that the rider was not coming. The thought went into her with a cold chill of trouble, stopping the song on her lips, stilling the rocker in its swing. And then, quick as realization, she sprang up, covered her fire with haste to kill its light, put the babes to bed, and tore off her finery with angry hands.

Night again at the Rough and Ready.

Tables in full blast. Smoke clouds sailing thick. Goblets filling fast as the drinks bubbled in the

glasses, vanished and shone again. The wild piano ringing, boots thumping on the floor, Angel Allie dancing like a siren, with blue eyes following Dan Clehollis in his suave and elegant progress among his crowd. Clehollis, turning his cigar between his teeth, smiling, talking, watching the door that stood open to the rainy night.

For two nights he had missed a familiar figure, and he had not imagined himself capable of such unrest. There was a heat in his throat, a dryness on his tongue, set there by a fever of the heart which was new to him. He talked awhile with the grey-eyed stranger whom Hayden Shard introduced, asking with lively interest after news of Sacramento.

The town was booming with its inflowing life. Business was wildly speculative. There was little stability to anything. Gold was too profuse and easily got. Values were distorted.

Even society was based upon the same gambling foundation; everyone with any claim to prominence was welcome, no matter what his or her character or origin. And yet it was a wonderful city, with a future before it which there was no measuring. Yes, surely, the new town of San Francisco was coming forward; it was bound to do so, what with its marvellous harbour and its proud position as doorway to the world; but it would never have the pulling power of Sacramento, set in its golden lap of mine and fertile land.

So said Stanton Halliday, discoursing to an interested audience of the more sane men of Reading's Flat.

And then he felt on a sudden a lapse of attention, a drifting as it were of the heart and soul of that audience, and he turned to follow the direction of Clehollis' glance.

A tall figure was coming down the room, a tall figure in man's clothing, but whose walk was never a man's on earth, whose black head was bare above the swinging cape, and who smiled and nodded to this side and that.

The crowd opened to its progress with delighted eagerness, a dozen pairs of hands reached for the child that sat in the high bend of its arm, chairs were pushed back as it paused beside the faro layout.

Then, as Halliday gazed transfixed with horrified astonishment, Sandra Dehault flung back her wrap and sat down in her accustomed place. The smiling dark eyes lifted and swept round the room.

They met those of the haggard woman at the far piano, lingered a moment, lighted at the face of Texas Tom, and then looked squarely into his own, without a trace of recognition, no slightest sign of knowledge.

Halliday did not know what he had expected, what inhibited hope had been in his subconscious mind, but with that cool impersonal stare a stab of disappointment pierced his vitals.

He saw this woman, alone in this notorious place, play like a veteran, her every thought engrossed in the lure of the game. He saw her win and lose indifferently. He watched the faces of the men about her and read correctly a hundred different passions. He had also seen the tragic face of Satan's Sister soften and lose its bitterness for a fleeting moment when the two women exchanged that intimate look of greeting.

He saw Clehollis wander near and stand with thumbs in vest, chewing his cigar and looking down upon the head with its thick black braids glistening with raindrops, and placed him in a class apart. Whatever might be in the minds of the crowd, this man was in deadly earnest. If the woman did not belong to him already she was slated to do so, and he was a force to be reckoned with.

All this passed through his mind, standing quietly about, looking on at this game and that, not playing at any.

Halliday was a business man, a miner, a steady climber on the road to solid success, and he was never bitten by the gambling lure. True, he played now and again for pastime, but the wild fever which burned in Sandra Dehault's flushed face as she hung upon the cards which the dealer turned was a strange thing to him.

He liked to watch its flames flicker in human faces, to wonder at its power. And here, in this face of exquisite beauty, he beheld it at its height.

Standing back beside the long bar, he watched her with intense interest. She won and laughed, snapping her fingers above her head, and doubling, bet again. Winning once more, she flung down her poke and its entire contents on the ace of clubs to win.

There was a new excitement in her to-night, a sparkling recklessness which charmed anew the circle of her idolators. Her lure had been enhanced a hundredfold by the spectacle of her affair with Bob McGee, who, by the way, was not in evidence, and there was not a man there who would not have crawled on hands and knees to win her favour.

They knew, however, to a man the trend of Clehollis' intent, and Clehollis had a reputation. This had helped a deal to hold back the ring of wolves.

Sandra left early, her poke swinging heavy on her wrist, and she went alone, as always. With her vanishing it was as if a play had finished. Men settled to their night's carousal in earnest, and Halliday heard no word about her, either good or bad.

Next day he went north along the road which was become a matter of branching trails, but he carried with him different thoughts, a moiling tumult of impressions, a breathless sequence of sensations.

Sleeping and waking, the vital, eager face of this woman was with him, try as he would to dismiss it from his mind.

A sort of shame encompassed him.

Why should he be troubled by it? The face of a strange woman, who could have no part in his ordered life, a woman who fought and worked and played with men as no woman in the world had ever done before? A woman of mystery, of suspicion—he would not yet say to his own mind "defame," but it was there, the ugly word.

And yet it was a love-face, a master-face, a thing that one could not forget if he lived a million years.

He had not forgotten it, he knew now certainly, for one conscious moment since that day in the street at Sacramento. Always it had been in the back of his mind, and always he had pushed it back and down, away from him in spirit.

A sort of cold horror of himself began to be with him.

He wished he had not come on this trip, profit or no profit, and by this was proved the honour of his soul.

He went north and returned. No more could be said of the journey. It was a time of nightmare trouble to him, a sort of march down the antechamber to a fiery furnace in which he was to be tried, heart, body and soul.

To the woman in question this period was one of astonished humiliation, of bitter — she had never dreamed how bitter!—disappointment and anger.

The memory of that dressed-up evening rankled.

She hated herself, hot-cheeked, because of it. She, who was to take what she wanted from life!

She put on of evenings now, not the trim neatness of the brown merino with the ruffled apron, but a dull grey dress of faded challis, plain and collarless, and never knew that the bronze and crimson of her dusky beauty shone therefrom like a red rose on a silver cushion!

Also, for the first time she covered the open windows, why, she did not know.

And then, on a wet night, just below the turn of her path to where the Great Road ran to the town, she met him, slim and quiet, walking he knew not where, his head beneath its jaunty tilted hat-brim bent in thought.

She felt the tide of anger rising in her, but, as helplessly as water runs downhill, she stopped. And then, with the sure knowledge of this his presence, every joy that she had known—the dawns and camp-fires of the Crossing, the sweet love of her babes, the fierce beauty of this virgin land with its pouring wealth—rose shouting in her heart, and she flung back her head and laughed.

The sound was crystal in the soft wet dark.

In spite of himself the man thrilled to it in every nerve.

"Oh, *monsieur*," said Sandra Dehault joyously, "it has been long months since that day in Sacramento, long months! But you did come—you did come!—the rider on the Great Road going north!"

She held out an eager hand and Halliday took it.

"Yes," he said, and the word came with difficulty because of the way his pounding heart seemed to choke his lungs.

The strong fingers, none so soft as they might have been, curled round his own with a touch as vital as a kiss—a pulling, happy touch. The flood of joy in Sandra betrayed her tongue into forwardness.

"See!" she cried, setting forth the babe beneath her cape. "How the little one has grown!"

Halliday reached and took the little body in his arms. It seemed the natural thing to do.

"And Hester and Connie, they thrive in this new country; and we have our cabin"—she rushed on as if time pressed and she must tell him all, this stranger whom she had seen but thrice before —"and we have done well. But come and see."

Without conscious volition, as if it had been ordered from the beginning and this her friend was come in natural sequence, she turned back up the path, and Halliday, scarcely conscious himself where he was going, followed with the Unnamed in his arms.

Striding ahead, Sandra flung open her cabin door, and thus it was that the rider came at last, crossing the sill which had been set aside for his foot, entering this sanctuary where the banked fire waited and the crane hung ready at the hearth.

The girl strode in after him, knelt and stirred

the embers, pushed forth the precious chair. She flung her cape aside, and reached and took the tilted hat from his head.

For a moment she gazed upon him breathlessly as he sat down with the babe upon his unaccustomed knee, holding the broad hat in her two hands aimlessly. She had known him to be handsome there in the early fall, but here he was more than so. The fair hair was abundant, falling a bit upon his fine forehead; the brows beneath were straight, the grey eyes deep and steady.

The mouth! As she looked upon his lips at close range once more Sandra felt the same aching desire which she had voiced to her friend Ann Lightfoot that first night, to little Ann's painful embarrassment.

It would be an easy matter to kiss them, very easy indeed. There, just where the corner curved into the lean cheek.

Halliday looked gravely up at her, and Sandra blushed as if he had read her yearning thought aloud in the still cabin!

Hastily she put the hat by, swung the crane aside to hang its kettle on, and said primly: "If you will excuse me, sir, a short moment?"

At his reply she vanished behind the curtain in the corner.

CHAPTER XVII

FIRES ON LIFE'S HORIZON

When she came forth a little while later she was a different creature. The purple delaine swept its rosebud bloom about her, the wide lace collar was clasped by its cameo, the pale silk stockings shone under the crossed straps of the slippers.

She was a woman, womanly, beautiful as damask roses in a warm garden at sunset. The man, beholding her thus for the first time, thought dimly of these things, adding a wide stretch of summer sea beyond, a sundial and cavaliers with swords.

There was about her a dignity, a depth, a manner harking back to such backgrounds—and Halliday was astounded.

Instinctively he rose to look at her, hanging the child unceremoniously head down in his awkward arm. With a gasp Sandra rescued it and set it down on one of the skin rugs.

"Watch her, mind," she told him. "She is creeping now, little wise one! Into this and that and everywhere. When I leave them alone I have that railing yonder for the fire."

Deftly and quickly, talking gaily and with beautiful words—or, such beautiful words as came

not often in her simple life—Sandra set the burnished teacups down, brought forth the canister, wrapped the pot in its knitted cosy.

Then she, too, sat her down on one of the stools, though Halliday earnestly proffered the chair, and smiling at him, said:

"Now tell me everything, *monsieur,* every littlest thing which has happened to you and to all those my friends whom I left in the city on the river's lip. All! That is too large a word. There are but two. Tell me of Captain Lightfoot and little Ann. I love them both in memory."

Tell her what had happened to him!

For an awful moment Halliday was dumb and cold. Strange stirrings were in his heart. One moment wild fires were flaring in him, strange, excited, happy things that made him think of dawns and hilltops, of flowers and exalted joys; the next a rush as of dark waters sounded in his very soul. He had a fleeting vision of the river, running deep and strong with the fall rains, and of Lilian Grey sitting her horse beside it, looking down with innocent eyes.

He shook himself mentally and began to speak, gazing into the fire.

The town was growing. Several saw-mills had been put up lately to augment the one on American River which Captain Sutter had erected a few years back, and more and more families were securing lumber for houses. Also, business was booming, every kind under the sun.

The Lightfoots still lived in town, down along the water-front, though John had bought a piece of land, good level bottom, out in the direction of Hock Farm, where Captain Sutter lived, broken in heart and purse, since the inpouring and overbearing horde of the squatters had taken his lands and robbers had killed his great herds of cattle.

Sandra clicked an indignant and astonished tongue.

Captain Sutter poor? The man to whom the whole of the new territory owed so much in pioneering, in never-failing kindness, in far-reaching vision! It was unthinkable! But Halliday assured her it was true, much as it was to be regretted. Not so long ago he had seen the gallant and kindly man, and, though he was still the gentleman of polished manners, dressed in his frock-coat and wide blue cape, with his close-clipped military moustache, there was a sadness about him now, a breaking, a giving-up, as it were, which must perforce sadden the thinking mind of the beholder.

But John and Ann Lightfoot were very happy in the prospect of their new venture, and with the opening of the spring they would build them a cabin and move out.

Little Ann, was she still looking for good to do, wounds to heal?

Indeed she was, said Halliday, and her latest spiritual charge was that Doctor Bidwell, who had come over in their train.

Sandra's sweet mouth hardened instantly.

"It was he," she said sharply, "who orphaned the Unnamed and her sisters. Gross neglect, drunken carelessness——"

"Yes," he told her patiently, "but Doctor Bidwell is on the road to redemption. He has done wonderful work among the sick of Sacramento, who, alas! are somewhat plentiful this wet winter; and in the matter of probing for a bullet, of disinfecting wounds, has acquired already a widespread reputation."

The hard mouth softened.

"That is good," she said; "very good. I am ashamed of my condemnation."

The man turned his grey eyes upon her and a flash of portent shot between them, something which thrilled them both so that Sandra looked and looked at him, lips apart as if athirst, and Halliday glanced quickly back at the fire.

The Branscombs were doing well, as also were all the rest.

Some had joined the ranks of the squatters and were making ready to erect homes.

"And those three brothers from Missouri, the Haspers, bad lots—what has become of them?"

Whereat Halliday told her all about the killing of the faro dealer in the Stinking Tent, the death of Holway, the escape of Jard and Britt, and of his own encounter with the masked robber on his way up from Red Bluff.

The girl, carving out her life alone and well satisfied with it, was yet avid for news of these with whom she had travelled all the long months of the Crossing, and the time flew by unnoticed, while the rain dripped softly from the eaves and the Unnamed lay crumpled in rosy slumber on the rug between their feet.

It was the shallowing song of the kettle on the crane which brought the girl to a realization, and she sprang up to lay the child beside her sleeping sisters, to draw the pot of tea.

Halliday drew the table near, and presently the firelight danced on these two breaking their first bread together in that delightful intimacy which so tenderly speaks of the best of life.

When at last Halliday drew forth the huge gold watch from his inner pocket he sprang up with a contrite exclamation.

"Miss Dehault," he cried in consternation, "it is twelve of the clock! I beg a thousand pardons!"

Sandra, risen too, shook her black head and smiled.

"Why?" she asked simply.

"Because I have stayed so long! It is unpardonable!"

"Is it," asked the girl wistfully, "when we have waited since the fall?"

There was in words and look a tightening of the bond between them, a connivance, a straightforward looking in the face of fact which sent a chill to the man's heart.

So—she had known, then, that he would come! When he himself had not known it. She had "waited since the fall"—since that day when he had felt her arm about his neck, her lips against his cheek—heaven help him, he knew with another flash that he had never ceased to feel them since!

He straightened, took his hat from the hand that had reached to serve him so quickly, extended his own.

"Good night, Miss Dehault," he said. "I thank you for a most pleasant evening. To-morrow I shall be gone by daybreak."

Sandra came close, took the hand and folded it in both her own.

The exquisite face, with its dark rose beauty, was lifted, the long dark eyes searched his face, feature by feature, with the simple directness of a child. They rested longest on that lean cheek where she had kissed him, as if they would bring back the memory of that kiss to him. They did, most keenly, and Halliday's fingers twitched from her clasp.

"You—will come again, Galahad?" this woman said with a sliding tremor in the voice that could play so exquisitely on the strings of sound. "You—will ride again—on the Great Road—coming north?

For a moment the man bit his lips, striving after order in his rushing thoughts, and in the little silence that fell there came, sharp but furtive, the tap of knuckles on the barred door.

For one second Sandra stood transfixed.

She had heard that sound before, and always she had laughed to herself, rocking serenely in her little chair.

Now the blood poured up along her throat in fury, her eyes widened. With one motion she had whirled from Halliday, was across the room to where an ancient leather case reposed on the third trunklid. With two more she had flung it open and turned back, her arm outstretched and in her hand the beautiful duelling pistol, its gold-and-pearl shining in the light.

Without a second's pause it spoke in the quiet room and a splinter stood out from the rough door's face above a clean-drilled hole, accurately placed at the height of a man's head. There was a startled oath outside, the sound of feet running down the path.

But when Halliday looked again at Sandra Dehault she stood with flushed face, toying with the pistol, and he could have sworn that there were tears upon her lashes.

The spell was broken.

The beauty of the warm garden where roses bloomed and shadows fell upon the dial was gone as if a cold blue fog had drifted in from sea. But when he bowed with a new stiffness she raised her eyes to his, and he saw the tears that swam in them thickly.

Despite the chill that was in him he had to hold himself hard to keep from taking her savagely

against his breast, from kissing the long eyes under that smoke of tears.

"Good night," he said, laying his hand for a shaking moment over hers upon the weapon. "I—shall—shall—ride—— Good-bye," he finished, biting down upon the promise as he had pushed her face down in his memory—since the fall.

At the change in his tone the girl flung back her head. Instantly she had caught back the atmosphere of the terraces, the cavaliers with swords, the background of bold blood and its fair traditions.

"Good-bye," she said, and there were no sliding minors in the words, "I wish you a safe journey, *monsieur,* and—God speed."

A little later Clehollis entered the Rough and Ready.

Angel Allie, watching as she was always for sight of his face, saw the pallor of his skin, the narrow slits of his eyes, the set to his shaven jaw. Saw him pass through his crowds of patrons without his usual smiling urbanity.

Over her partner's flannel-clad shoulder she glanced at his feet. At the soles of the gay stitched boots there clung a trace or two of earth, the red-brown clay-like soil which ran in a broad ribbon down from the hills behind to stripe the town's skirts—*at the south.*

Just beyond it stood the cabin with the brightly curtained windows.

The painted lips closed in a straight line, went

as white as Clehollis' face. A little later she opened a door in the far regions behind the gambling hall, closed it, stood against it. Clehollis, striding the floor, stopped and looked at her.

"It's no use, Dan," she said quietly, "she's not for you, and if she was I wouldn't let her be."

"What you mean, Angel?"

"You know what I mean. An' you know me, too."

The man laughed.

"Don't worry that yellow head of yours, Angel," he said. "This time you're barking up the wrong tree."

He *did* know her—full well—and it was no part of his plan to pit her against the woman he wanted.

Therefore he came and put his arms around her, fondling her.

The girlish creature sank into his embrace with a gasp, as if she sank in waters she could by no means stem.

Here was a great love, albeit stained and distorted, and it was a pity the man could not have treasured it. Cherished, it would have blessed him.

"You're altogether wrong, Little One," he told her, lying; "you jump at conclusions."

Looking down at the tell-tale boots Angel Allie smiled with sickly bitterness.

CHAPTER XVIII

A COVENANT OF LOVE

Back in Sacramento Halliday went to the home of the Greys with a heart so heavy in his breast as to be a burden.

There he found an atmosphere so sweet, so heartily friendly, so filled with ordered joy that it was a pleasure to step inside the splendid house. Honourable hearts make happiness, even under grey skies, and when great blessings attend them their influence and light spread as far as contact goes. The banker was geniality itself. Mrs. Grey was serenely content with all her world. And Lilian was like a hushed cloister for pearly radiance.

The wedding was set for early summer, and already there were a thousand sweet and secret preparations under way for its fulfilment. Fabrics too fine to be obtainable in the inland town had been ordered from the port below, and already a seamstress—a woman of the Lightfoot train whose husband had died shortly after their arrival—was coming to the mansion daily at a stiff price to sew long fine seams by hand.

Looking at his bride-to-be Stanton Halliday was under a fire of the spirit which he had never

dreamed of. The girl was all that the most exacting could ask for, and he gazed upon her with a sort of wondering adoration. The ecstasy of her innocent heart was apparent to all and sundry who looked upon her. The glow and radiance in her was like a light behind thin white marble, exquisite.

They rode together by the river, passed the Lightfoot cabin, and Halliday presented the girl to Ann Lightfoot, who fell in love with her upon the instant and felt that love returned as instantly.

"They are two good and gentle women," the man thought, watching, "and they have the secret password of their kind."

But hold! was it only their kind who had this?

He saw in memory the same thing flash between two women in the smoke-filled atmosphere of a notorious dance-hall—and the world at large would not have called them good or gentle.

The tide of life was deepening about Stanton Halliday.

He stood with his rein upon his arm politely waiting while these two new friends talked together, Ann telling Lilian about the terrible attack of croup which her youngest child had just got over, and Lilian listening as if the matter were of grave importance. It was so that Doctor Bidwell came upon the scene, to be presented by Ann and to turn a painful red as he recognized The Golden Lily who had cried to him that day at the cross-road.

The girl, too, was a trifle embarrassed.

There had been a change in Doctor Bidwell, a very noticeable change. He was a little thinner, and there were deep lines in his really fine face, as if some unsparing knife of the spirit had carved them there. But he was straight as a die. There was a sort of pride in the lift of his shoulders which had not been there the night Halliday had seen him follow John Lightfoot from the Stinking Tent. And when he raised his cavernous eyes to the fair face of the girl there was in them something unreadable, something deep and holy, a steady light which burned with solemn beauty.

He bowed and passed with only the barest greeting commensurate with good breeding, but all three felt a wind of wholesomeness go with him, as it were. He was becoming a personage in the roaring town, a man noted for his skill and his unfailing kindliness. Never had he been called upon that he did not answer, even riding great distances into the rugged foot-hills to this and that far-flung camp where some young life was flickering from a wound, and staying by till the light flared back or went out for ever. These things travelled about among the heedless throngs with a tender grace, and this Doctor Bidwell was coming to be loved.

Long after Halliday had parted from Lilian he pondered the things he knew of life of late. A few months ago he had been a free agent, living

cleanly as a man might live in that wild environment, his lines laid in a straight and simple course. Now he was engaged to be married. The calm and peace of his existence had given place to a vast flood of emotions which continually swept him, bewilderingly, without his volition. There was in him a grave fever which he could not understand, a sense of impending tragedy and disaster, a coming sadness. He had seen this Doctor Bidwell snatch himself, or be snatched, from the low plane of drunken uselessness to a clean and firm foot of respectability. He had seen the Haspers become outlaws overnight. And he had seen a woman, young, eager, with every seeming of truth and beauty become an habitué of the dance-halls!

All these things had happened regardless of the humans they affected, so it seemed.

For some there was redemption, unsought and unwanted; for others there seemed to be its antithesis, equally as unsought. Or was it? Did not the human soul seek its own undoing, albeit through sorrow and pain?

Was it the dark river of which Lilian spoke flowing onward and drawing them in—the river of life, of circumstance—or was it that Great Road which came ever to those eager eyes in Reading's Flat on which they travelled, holding the reins themselves?

Halliday was bewildered. A new sadness was with him. He gave much time to thought. How-

ever, he was very busy with arrangements for the widening of his business activities in the north, and with his daily calls at the grey mansion and an occasional visit at the home of his uncle, Mayor Richards, the time passed quickly, and he found himself on the eve of another trip on the *Jack Hayes*.

It was strange, the odd sense of excitement that surged in him. He tried to his utmost to crush it down, and partially succeeded.

Standing in the sedate entrance to the grey mansion on the night before his departure, he held Lilian in his arms with a sort of despairing savagery, as if he would cling to her frail goodness as one, drowning, clings to a spar.

He kissed her many times, smoothing the golden head, and murmured tender words against the rose-leaf cheek.

"You will not be long away this time, will you, Stanton?" the girl asked anxiously. "Always when you are gone alone into this wild country I am racked with trouble until your return. I have fear night and day—and—and I pray constantly for your safety."

"Not long," the man promised; "not longer than I can help."

The night was dark. Also the everlasting rain was falling. In the high murk of the clouds that hung between the earth and heaven there were uncounted tons of water.

Sandra was coming home—alone, as usual.

Her poke was very heavy to-night with the gold of her winnings. Soon she would take the stone jar once again to Grimm and Rumbler. Must take it before the twenty-fourth, when the Express Box would go down to San Francisco with its gold.

This time *her* gold would be in it—literally pounds of it, thousands of dollars! Her guerdon for the future, hers and the little ones'. What matter that the greater part of it had been won across a gaming table? She had no scruples. If men chose to wager and to lose, that was life, a hazard. She lost her own as happily as she won. But she had lost little. Sometimes she pondered this, puzzling. Her luck was wonderful.

Since the rains had set in for the season she had given up the digging entirely. She kept her claim, however, and with the first return of better weather she would again turn miner.

So she was thinking, striding forward with the Unnamed sleeping on her breast, when a figure blocked her path in the darkness.

It was a huge figure, enveloped in a cloak, and in a second it had its arms around her, its bearded lips seeking her mouth.

The child in her arms was a hindrance.

Her head, flung to one side, saved her lips a moment, and then the hot breath of passion swept her face, and this man kissed her, a long, terrible

pressure that sickened her to the foundations of her soul.

When she could tear herself away she was panting and outraged.

"You beast!" she said stiffly through her drawn-back lips. "You unspeakable beast! Must I take to packing a gun? Stand by!"

And she went forward, her pace no whit hastened by the encounter. The babe was whimpering, and she soothed it, murmuring.

But when Sandra Dehault next appeared in public the pearl-handled duelling pistol hung at her hip in a brand-new holster which she had asked Jason Craig to buy for her.

"Have—have you—needed this?" he asked her diffidently. "Oh, why will you sit in th' seat of th' ungodly after this man's fashion? It ain't fitten for a woman like you, Miss Dehault, an' it fair breaks my heart."

"Jason," said Sandra swiftly, with a rush of sympathy, "I wish you would stop thinking about me and my doings. You are too good a man to waste yourself like this. Forget me and look to the incoming trains next spring to bring you a wife, some gentle girl who will settle down and—and love you as you deserve. You are a good man, Jason, and I'd love to see you happy."

Jason shook his head.

"I can't," he said miserably, "while th' very soul in my body crawls in your footsteps."

If Sandra had been beyond resisting before,

the swagger of that gun about her slim hips was the last of lure.

"I swan!" cried the man from Gold Run. "I do swan to hickey! Didn't I say she was good? Plumb good to her boot heels? And don't that prove it?"

"To anyone with a grain of sense," said Satan's Sister flatly, "it never needed proof."

And the haggard eyes in the tragic face followed the tall girl with burning intensity.

Clehollis looked upon her with a strange expression. He felt a tightening of the coils of life about him, and yet he played the game, would play it to the end. So he went boldly to her cabin in the daytime.

She did not ask him in, but he took the liberty without the invitation, stepped in and closed the door. He laid his broad hat on her table, sat down at her hearth and looked at her.

"I've come, Sandra," he said simply.

"So I see. Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Clehollis?"

"Yes," he said swiftly; "love me!"

Standing, the girl laughed.

"I have not the will," she said.

"Sit down, girl," he said, "and let's talk this over."

"There is nothing to talk over. I told you that once before."

A little pulse was beating in Sandra's throat.

The sight of his complaisant bulk in the little

chair where Halliday had sat that magic evening stirred anger in her.

Clehollis reached and caught her hand. She snatched it away. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well. I can wait, my dear," he said, rising, taking up his hat. "I have waited before for things I wanted."

"Did they—always—come?" she asked derisively.

"They came—always," he drawled. "See here, Miss Dehault: I want you. There's no use beating about the bush. You must have known it from the beginning."

"Sure I know it," she answered, "but that doesn't change matters. I'll never come."

"Don't be so sure. You want gold—I'll give it to you always. So long as we both shall live."

"And what would I do with it—tied down to a man? For whose sight would I buy fine clothes?"

"Good heavens!"

Even Clehollis was shocked at the bold words.

"Do you, then, want to attract all men?"

"Yes," said this intrepid woman, "until I find —and—take—the right one." But she knew, all suddenly, that she lied, that she wanted gold for fine garments for one man, one man whom she had already found, the right man without a shadow of doubt.

"I'll give you everything!" cried Clehollis. "Take you to the ends of the earth in ships! Build you a home in New York—in Paris—in

South America—anywhere! I'll do anything—be anything! Tell me there is hope for me!"

The hard, sensuous face was strained with a real effort. For the first time since forgotten youth this man promised honestly and faith, and meant it. But the woman shook her head.

"Don't break the friendliness you have shown me," she said, "with these wild impossibilities."

Clehollis swallowed once, bowed and smiled.

"I am a good waiter," he said, and went jauntily away down the path to the road.

That night Stanton Halliday once more rode into Reading's Flat. It was dark and the rain was falling, and he pulled the hat low over his eyes, riding straight ahead, looking neither to the right nor to the left. The little cabin was just beyond, the little cosy cabin with its singing kettle and the firelight on its hearth, with the seeming of warm gardens where roses bloomed and love walked abroad in perfume!

He had sworn in his soul that he would sternly pass, that he would not even look upon it. And he did so ride, but the beating of his heart caused the lights of the camp to waver in his vision, and as he came abreast of it the light from its own window, the "sunrise window" she had called it, shone in the dark like a beacon. And Stanton Halliday turned helplessly in his saddle and looked at it.

In its tiny square there stood a figure gazing

out at the night, a tilted head pressed over against a smaller one, an arm that encircled a child——

An hour later Sandra Dehault flung back her door and gazed in his face with parted lips and eyes that were deep with gladness.

"Sir Galahad!" she cried. "It has been nineteen days and an hour!"

But to save his life Stanton Halliday could not smile.

His whole being was surcharged with an emotion too deep for joy. It was as if Fate knocked on his soul.

He sat down by the hearth and the three little ones, not yet asleep for the night, stared round-eyed, until Sandra bade them mind their manners and greet the stranger, which Hester and Connie did with credit. The Unnamed could only gurgle and extend a wet thumb taken from a rosy mouth.

With a jealous instinct Sandra drew the covers on her windows.

No profane eye should witness this communion.

For nineteen days she had thought of little else save this man's return—and he was here. Her Rider on the Road, her man of thousands!

She sat on her low stool with the brown merino billowing about her and smiled at him, reading his face as was her wont.

A silence fell between them, and presently she said:

"There is something wrong with you, Mr. Halliday. What is it?"

"Wrong? No—I—think not," he answered gravely. "I have been very busy of late. My business interests are widening."

"Yes, that would take time—and thought. But it is not work. Are you sure you are well?"

The little light of laughter came in the grey eyes, far back.

The sense of gravity lessened.

"Like little Ann, aren't you," he asked, "always looking for wounds to heal?"

"Not a bit like Ann," she denied, "not half so good. No healer—I am a hurter instead."

The long eyes glanced at him side-wise with a little contrite crinkle. "Always you behold me fighting, do you not?"

This time Halliday laughed, remembering the tumult in the street.

"But to punish insolence," he said, "and that is good."

Bit by bit Halliday's restraint relaxed. They talked with little rushes, with silences that fell for no accountable reason, with halting words and detached sentences that seemed entirely adequate. Sandra told him how her four black horses were wintering in the lean-to-shed, coming in at night for the scant feed she always gave them, though there was still forage in the hills. A little, not much, mostly brush, and that was none too good. Halliday told her of the magic green carpet which spread along the Sacramento Valley at the southern end. Down near Suisun Bay—he called it

Soosoon—the feed was abundant. The tulés, too, were lush with green and stock could winter there.

A thousand subjects clamoured for discussion in their minds.

Music—Sandra laid an eloquent hand upon her heart.

That was one blessing she had left behind when she set her face towards the West, she said. On her father's plantation there had been much of that. Piano, harpsichord—she could see the slim form of her dear father yet, elegant, snowy white of head, rapt of face, with his violin against his sunken cheek, her father Pierre Jacques André Dehault. A quick sigh lifted her breast, curved her lips downward. Dead—five months before the Crossing—the gallant man whom she had loved above all things—dead on his mortgaged land—with the mortgage never lifted—she, Sandra, could have carried on—he had taught her, since he had no son, all a son should know of work and obligation and management——

Was Halliday interested? Or was she tiring him?

The man, hanging absorbed upon her words, shook his head.

He realized suddenly that this was what he had longed to hear.

He had desired, unconsciously, to know from what she had sprung.

Yes, they had had sweet fine things, there on

the other edge of the world, *père* Jacques and she —the music and books—and—and the occasional wise speech of this and that old friend of her father come from the world's marts to recall a while the glory of departed days in France. There had been good blood in France—lands and wealth——

Halliday, listening, caught again the mental atmosphere of the terraced garden, the besworded cavaliers——

But *père* Jacques had lost it all, approximately, before he came to the new world to recoup his fortunes. Mother she had never known, save from the tiny miniature which her father carried on his heart until the day of his death, and which was buried with him, there on the plantation's skirts.

"And so you see, *monsieur,*" finished the girl wistfully, "I was more son than daughter to him, a rider at his side, a shot that he was proud of, a swordsman, too. I am well equipped to fend for myself in life. I am somewhat a swashbuckling cavalier, an adventurer travelling the Great Road —a woman with a man's desire to taste of all the good world has to offer that can in honour be taken from it."

She paused, looking into the fire, and Halliday's heart leaped like a wild thing in his breast.

All the good that could, in honour, be taken from it!

"I do not trouble to tell all this to all and sun-

dry, Mr. Halliday," she said, "but you must know."

"Ah, yes," he breathed, "I—must know."

"Those people of the train, excepting John Lightfoot and his wife and Jason Craig—Bah! they frowned upon my short skirt and my boots. To them I am *tabu* and I do not care. I set my heart upon this great new land—and I have made it here. I visioned gold—and I am getting it. One thing more I want, *monsieur,* and that I know will come——"

"Yes?" said Halliday, wetting dry lips, "and that——?"

"Love," said Sandra simply; "the great love that shall come to me here beside the road, the splendid road which carries all of life upon its running tide, even wealth—and happiness—and wholesome work."

Halliday's eyes were strained upon her face—the temples, the cheek, the curve of the lovely mouth—

"All?" he said with a tightening of his throat. "Does it carry, too, sorrow—and pain—and—abnegation, Sandra?"

At her name upon his lips she turned to him with a little gasp of sheer delight, put out a hand as naturally and helplessly as the Unnamed might have done, and touched his arm.

"All—everything. How could it be life unless it did? Abnegation—giving up—sacrifice—those

must come to some poor hearts—God pity them! Giving up—that is a fire in the heart's core, something to eat it to ashes. I—I would fight to the last ditch for—for that I loved. It is the *good,* like little Ann, who can renounce and win that blessing of peace, *monsieur*—not the firebrands like myself. And yet, that is part of what makes the splendour of this road of ours, is it not?"

Halliday did not answer. He was sitting forward, hands clasped so tightly together between his knees that the knuckles shone white in the light.

Hester and Connie and the Unnamed, snuggled together in the farther bed, had fallen fast asleep. Outside, the rain dripped and the black horses moved in their shed.

Sandra, watching her fire with shining eyes, went on.

"Yes—it is the road of the soul as well as the body. It is a gallant road—oh, a gallant, gallant road! And we take from it those things we desire—if we are strong. I have taken the dawns and twilights of the wilderness—work—and gold. I have taken gambling because I liked it—I have taken this house and this fire upon the hearth. I have taken happiness along with all of these. Ann Lightfoot, now, she has taken the gold of service to humanity, to life—good deeds——"

"You, too," said Halliday, "you, too! These three babes—you give them care and love, a shelter——"

"And get it back four-fold, *monsieur,*" she answered quickly, "they are my precious pawns."

"The poor old Chinaman in the street that day——"

"Who would not have done the same?"

"None but you of all the crowd."

"Pouf!" said Sandra. "Little things, my friend. Mere bagatelles."

"But of these are honours made."

The girl leaned to him, searching his face, looking up with beautiful eyes.

"You—think so—of me?" she asked breathlessly, "after—after all you know of me—the fighting—the adventuring——"

Her voice slid down to a whisper warm, intimate, tremulous.

"—the—day in Sacramento?"

Stanton Halliday rose to his feet unsteadily, stood biting his lip. The fire-lighted room, lost in the rainy night, wavered about him. He clutched at memories of Sacramento, the familiar streets, the river, the drawing-room of the Grey mansion—Lilian——

"Yes," he heard himself saying as from a great distance, "after all of these."

"Oh!" said Sandra, and the word was a sharp indrawing of the breath as if with ecstasy. "Oh!"

Next moment she had caught his hand in hers and pressed it, palm inward, upon her cheek, that

warm cheek, round and soft and glowing like the red roses in that sea-girt garden——

With one motion the man lifted her up to her tall height, gazed a moment with dilated eyes upon her face, and folded her to his heart.

He did not kiss her. He stood like one in a dream and held her against that heart which beat with awful blows against his breast. There was a mist across his vision, a breathlessness in him, a feel of tears in his throat——

Deep in his consciousness he was aware in some dim fashion of disaster, of fear, but of glory that shone as from the very ramparts of Heaven. His face was grey as ashes. His lips were drawn. And yet he knew, trembling in every limb, that this was life's peak and pinnacle, that he had been but a traveller on the slopes before, riding in half lights and shadows.

This was love. Love with its unspeakable heights, its blinding radiance—its tragic depths below.

Love that gripped and shook him, that ached already in his inmost heart as with a mortal hurt.

And then Sandra Dehault raised her head and kissed him.

Kissed him full upon the lips, a long, tender pressure, warm as her heart and as serenely bold.

She laid her cheek to his and sighed with ineffable joy.

Her arms were wound about his throat, hold-

ing him as closely as he held her, returning with all promise, all surrender, the warmth of the embrace.

They did not speak, and there were distinctly audible the small dropping of a coal upon the hearth, the drip of the cabin's eaves.

After a reckonless space of time the woman drew away.

She, too, was grave, exalted.

"Come," she said, "it is a covenant, Galahad."

She took his hand and drew him with her to the curtain which crossed the north-west corner, pulled it aside, dropped it behind them. The light from the fire came faintly through, but Halliday could see the hanging garments, the piled bonnet-boxes, the small intimate things of this her poor sanctuary.

And then he saw before him an astounding thing, a tiny altar with its crucifix and candles, its exquisite small statue of the Virgin and the Child, its narrow altar-cloth of fine handwork! A narrow, low bench before it was covered with another cloth; before his whirling wits could gather themselves he was kneeling on the bench beside the girl, his head bowed, his hand trembling exceedingly, clasped in both her own held on her breast. He knew that she was whispering strange words, strange, sweet, intimate words of joy and gratitude which had to do with a rider and a road, with love and promises, and which were addressed to One with Whom she seemed familiar.

He, with his head bowed—his guilty head, the head of dishonour, of broken faith—Stanton Halliday shut his lips tight upon a groan.

He never knew how he reached the pine hotel that night, nor at what hour.

CHAPTER XIX

FLAMING SHADOWS

"Mr. Clehollis," said Sandra, laughing, "I'm going to play hard for another week. I hope I win all you can afford to lose."

"Eh? A week? Why the limit?"

"Because I mean to reform. Don't all sinners do so when they have sinned enough?"

"And you," Clehollis' eyes were narrow between their lids, calculating, "you have done so?"

"I shall have done so by the time the next Express shipment goes down. I am rich, Clehollis, rich! Thanks to you."

"Yes," he thought grimly, "thanks to me—you don't quite know how literally."

"I shall have my gold put safely by in the most solid bank in San Francisco for the future. The little ones—it is for them, partly—their schooling later, their chance in life."

"And what for you? The travel, the silks and satins?"

"For me?"

The girl threw back her handsome head, arrogant with the pride of life.

"For me?" she said. "Why, gold too. Did I not say I am rich?"

The gambler's eyes narrowed yet more.

"So," he told himself grimly, "it's gold that makes you insolent. And it's a man who makes you cold to me. With both—ah—eliminated, I wonder if that head would tilt so high?"

"Child," said Mrs. Grey anxiously, "what ails you of late? I have noticed a difference in you. I shall brew you some sassafras tea. With the spring coming closer and all the natural excitement of this time it is not strange; and yet I do not like the lassitude I see in you. Do you feel well, darling?"

Lilian raised obedient blue eyes to her mother's face.

"I am well, I think," she said gravely, though with a small quiver of the childish mouth, "all well but here."

She touched her breast above the heart.

"What?" cried the mother sharply, "why child—why—you mean——"

"Nothing that I can say, dear mother—nothing that I mean in concrete form. It is only—only—a feeling, a prescience. Do you remember what I said the night of our arrival, about the feeling in my heart about the future—its meed of great joy and of great sorrow? I have had the joy—all these wonderful weeks past with Stanton's love. But now I feel the cold shadow of the other."

Mrs. Grey was aghast.

"Stanton?" she asked sharply. "Is it he?"

Lilian shook her head.

"He—he——" With the extreme delicacy of her nature, her training, the girl could hardly speak of the intimate things of love, its communions, its caresses. "He is tender—and kind—always. He has ever been so. He holds me in his arms, and—kisses me a great deal. But, oh, mother, he looks over my head so often now! And there is something in his eyes, something suffering and deep, something that was not there before—before——"

"Yes," prompted the mother, "before——?"

"Before he began going north among the mines!"

"H'm!" said Mrs. Grey judicially. "I think, dear child, that I shall not brew the sassafras tea after all. You need a good strong tonic, something with iron and bitter roots, and I shall have your father bring in that Doctor Bidwell of whom I hear such good reports. Your fiancé is a very busy young man, concerned just now with all the work and details of making his financial future solid—as befits the husband of your father's daughter—and must not be troubled by a sad sweetheart. These vague fears are part of love."

Thus the usually astute lady disposed of the matter, and missed its truth entirely, the terrible truth which was beginning to stand out clear already to the innocent and inexperienced eyes of the girl.

Doctor Bidwell came over that very afternoon,

cavernous-eyed and earnest, and sat a while talking gently with her. There was a deal of silver showing at the doctor's temples which had not been there six months before, but the gaunt form under the neat black garments was replete with power. There was a sense about him as of regained strength, a grip and surety on the reins of life, a calm and poise that made for confidence in the eyes of the beholder.

He held the small hand of the girl a moment, stilling his own pulse with what effort none knew, and found it normal. He studied the listless young creature during his hour's visit, left the phials which her parents desired, but knew when he rode away on his good horse which had been tied at the block that here was no sickness of the flesh, but rather of the soul.

And what depths of longing, of idolatry, of sadness, that knowledge stirred in his secret heart no one on earth would ever know.

Dan Clehollis absented himself from the Rough and Ready, from Reading's Flat. He left no word as to his intentions or his destination, not even with Angel Allie, for the first time in three years. But after a wet ride on horseback and a night on the fussy little *Jack Hayes*, he landed at Sacramento, to mingle with its moiling life, to thread through every gambling hall in town, to sëarch out certain among their habitués. And the particular high spot among these gay and reckless

spirits was Buck Lockwell, perpetually unsober, roaring, swaggering, flaring of beard, who fell upon his immaculate neck with uproarious joy and blows to fell an ox. All these Clehollis accepted patiently.

He wanted news of the town, and Buck Lockwell was invaluable in that capacity.

And north between the weeping hills, with their green mantles furred now with the white of sifting snows, two people moved in paradise. A paradise of fools, built upon the frailty of human honour, human strength, but gemmed with romance, fair with light against the bastions of a love so great as to still the breath in their throats, hush them with sudden fears.

Halliday stayed three days on that upward trip, rushed through his duties at the mines above, came back and stopped again.

He was in a daze, moving as if without volition, sitting hours in the crude room at the Palace Hotel, his head in his hands, his heart burning in him, his mind a cauldron of fiery thoughts, rising with the dusk to go unerringly to the magic cabin on the town's southern edge.

Always with the closing of its door behind him the black things fled away and only the glory remained, too bright for mortal eyes. Sandra Dehault was at his breast, her lips against his cheek, her strong arms folding him in such passion of

love as to dim his vision, light his veins with flowing fire.

"Galahad!" she would murmur happily. "Oh, Galahad! It has been twenty-three hours! And I have made a pudding, though there is little milk. The cow is going dry. Hester, run and put more water in the kettle." Or: "The world stopped this day, Sir Knight; neither it nor I can go on without you!" Or again: "See! The Unnamed loves you, too!"—pushing forth the laughing child that its little arms, silk-soft and warm, might encircle his throat. So they stood together thus sometimes, the immortal trio, drunken with the ecstasy of the present, oblivious of the future, the future which must be reckoned with.

Sandra, studying the matter over gravely, had decided that the Unnamed should be christened.

"It is unfitting, Galahad," she told him, "that a child should reach the age of a year without a name. It is most unlucky. And she will soon be so."

So, on a night when a cold wind blew down from the snow-clad Shasta Range behind the town, they made ceremony of the sweet event. Halliday came early from the pine shack which called itself hotel, and Sandra had the cabin swept and garnished beyond its usual immaculate wont. Hester and Connie wore the dresses she had made by hand from the bright prints bought that memorable day in Sacramento, and the little one was clad in white from downy head to dimpled toe.

There was no priest at Reading's Flat that early year, and Sandra scorned the Reverend Bedial Print for a numskull and a bigot, so that she must needs perform the solemn rite herself.

There were no candles lighted ordinarily in this cabin, the dancing flames or the hearth sufficing. Never in all his after life could Halliday forget that charmed interior, soft and dark, with flickering points of light, like a Rembrandt painting, shut safe against the rain, the world.

But now the curtains were drawn aside across the sacred corner, and the tiny altar with its symbols stood revealed with candles on its ends. Sandra wore a soft white dress herself, severely unrelieved by lace or cameo, and she was very solemn.

The man was filled with a vague sorrow and unease.

He was in the presence of holy things with which he had no right of touch. This woman whom he had once pondered over, she was holy too. One more shame was added to him when he thought how he had wavered as to what to call her—Madonna or Jezebel!

He shut his lips upon a groan, but knelt as she bade him with the wee one on his outstretched arm beneath the altar light.

The child's blue eyes were sweetly lifted; it lay still, and Sandra, holding a precious phial of blessed water brought from across the plains, was murmuring tenderly solemn words which partly

escaped his consciousness until she came to: "... Christen thee Jane Hollis ..." and touched with wet fingers the innocent brow.

Thus the ceremony that gave the babe a name, and the man thought of the woman "a server of life in all its moments! Oh, my God! What have I done—to her—and to myself—and to—to——" He could not bring himself to name The Golden Lily.

He was very quiet that night, distrait and saddened beyond all apparent reason. Sandra, sensing his mood with swift instinct, sat beside him with her black head resting on his arm, her palm to his, her babes clustered at her knees.

She smiled and looked at her fire, drowsy-eyed and sublimely happy, speaking little. Thus would they sit in those far years spread out before them, he and she, content, blessed, with other babes about them and the fair tilled fields smiling under the moon. Ah, it was a picture of ineffable beauty, and she began to speak of it softly, with the sliding minors running in her voice.

"Where will it be, I wonder, Galahad," she said, "this fair home of the future? There is little land hereabouts fit for farming, though I am rooted in this place! I love its every slope and valley, ridge and peak. But it must be broad land, must it not? With fields for running horses, for the herds of cattle. There will be a house, rough, of course, but spacious, the rooms large and high and dusky with draped windows. So were they on the plan-

tation of my father. I can play the harpsichord, and I have yet my father's violin. Oh, my dear, my dear! This is the 'button on creation's cap,' the home where love is. And we are rich, are we not, rich in all the good things of this most glorious world?"

She bent her head and kissed the palm of the hand in hers, and Halliday sprang to his feet, striking his breast with a clenched fist.

Astonished, the girl looked up at him.

In a moment he was on his knees beside her, his face hid in her breast, his arms strained about her as if in the agony of death.

"I," he said thickly, "am not worthy of such love, Sandra."

But the woman laughed divinely.

"Worthy?" she said. "Why, Mr. Halliday, you are to me all that there is of life on earth. You are my light and my warmth, my blue sky and fair winds, my sun, moon and stars. Does one question these? They are simply—life."

At Red Bluff Halliday passed close to Dan Clehollis on the landing where the *Jack Hayes* lay. They spoke to each other civilly—they who were soon to stand pitted against each other in deadly combat —and went their diverging ways, the one back to Reading's Flat, armed with the sword of knowledge, the other on to Sacramento.

CHAPTER XX

THE GAMBLERS

That journey down to the town on the river's lip was a gauntlet of the soul to Stanton Halliday. He slept no hour of it, neither in his camp by the road nor on the little boat, but walked interminably. His mind was numb with the ceaseless scourgings of remorse, regret and sorrow. His hands were clenched, his teeth set hard together.

How had it all come about? Why had life played him this scurvy trick? Made of him, an honourable man, a blackguard and a scoundrel? No name was too harsh to give himself; and yet he knew in his inmost soul that he was not these things.

What had he felt that fatal night at the Grey mansion when he had called and the banker and his wife had left him alone with Lilian? Tenderness, longing for love, the touch of the magic wand. But what had been its source, in what was its foundation laid? Was it the psychological hour, the propinquity of the beautiful girl that made him stoop and kiss her, that made him glow with joy and accept this tenderness, this sweetness, as love itself? Pacing the tiny space of the boat's state-room, he knew this was so, that thus

had life led him into the pitfall which held him now—for he had not known what love was, had never beheld its sacred face. And he knew, too, with clearing vision that it had been the memory of Sandra Dehault's lips upon his cheek that day in fall which had stirred to life in him that tenderness, that longing—and he had not recognized it.

When he reached Sacramento he stayed two days away from the Greys, striving for some conclusion, some solution of the tragic tangle, for tragedy it was.

When he did present himself he was so haggard of eye, so thinned of cheek, that the parents, wise and kindly, revised at once their judgment of their daughter's insight.

The child was right.

There was something wrong here, something pitifully wrong.

There was a gravity about their kind reception that stabbed Halliday to the heart. The sight of Lilian's lovely face was an added hurt. The girl was really wasting.

The future was beginning to urge its reckoning.

At his first moment alone with Lilian, Halliday took her gently in his arms, striving to comfort her as one comforts a child, but the clear, deep searching of her innocent eyes was not to be deceived. She looked long into his face, then drooped her golden head against him, weeping.

"The river, Stanton," she sobbed, "the river of life—it is drifting you away from me! And I can only stand on its brink and watch. I must take what it brings. Oh, the sorrow after the joy! I cannot direct—I, the bystander!"

The man tightened his clasp around the shivering girl-form.

And he had once assured her that that mighty river would bring her nothing but happiness—one so little and so kind!

He kissed her on brow and temple—the gentle kisses we give the weak and the dead—and set his lips together with a wrench of all his faculties.

"Little one," he said, "life does strange things to us. Terrible things. Robs us—and—blesses us at the same stroke. We go blindly—God knows how blindly! We can only hold to right and strength as best we may. Can we—not—set the wedding-day ahead?"

If Sandra Dehault had been happy in her gay choosing from the lap of life before, now she was radiant.

If gold had lent a swagger to her walk, love now made of her a goddess, high-headed, serene, laughing at trifles, ready to romp with the wee ones at a moment's notice. The joy in her was more than she could bear sedately.

She proved to Messrs. Todd and Waddell that she was an expert with the balanced blades, that she, too, could pin a falling leaf to a tree-trunk,

though the leaf must be perforce a scrap of wind-blown brown paper, and that she was, beyond peradventure, the best cook on the Oregon Trail.

"These here beans, now, ma'am," said Waddell gravely, "don't taste like nary bean I ever et, not in my hull life. No, sir, not nary one!"

"*Encore!*" cried the girl gaily, reaching for the silver spoon. "You will have more then?"

"Well," said the old man modestly, "sence ye insist, ma'am——" and passed his plate for the fourth time.

"Out on Hardscrabble last year," volunteered Todd, "some fellers et a hawk. They said it were better nor chicken. But we cooked one for three days an' it was tougher'n pussley. Them fellers was liars."

"Not so fast, Mr. Todd," said Waddell spiritedly. "I've always held that they might have ben right from their point o' view. Ourn must of ben old—a he—and I opine they's as much difference in hawks as women."

"Mebby—mebby," granted his milder partner, "but we ain't never ben friends with them fellers sence."

"Well," admitted Waddell, "I can't say as we have—no, to be honest, we ain't."

Interrupting this simple meal, blessed with good-fellowship, there came at Sandra's door a tap so low and timid as to be at first unrecognized. When it came again the girl laid down her spoon and opened.

On the stone step there stood a grotesque figure, the thin, shivering, black-silesia-clad, work-bowed figure of a Chinaman.

It was none other than the meek "chink" in whose scared behalf Sandra had settled with Bob McGee. His yellow old face, covered by a network of wrinkles, was inscrutable, smoothed clean of expression. Only the dull black eyes between their narrow lids spoke from one human heart to another.

In claw-like hands he held out to her a package, two packages rather, done up in tawdry paper of red and gilt design. He said something in the unintelligible pidgin-English of the day, bowed till his grey queue swept the stone, and setting down beside the lintel a strange object, turned away.

Sandra watched him wonderingly.

"What in the world," she said, "has he brought me?"

Waddell the irrepressible, hopping on his one leg, was at her shoulder.

"It's Chiny New Year, ma'am," he told her. "Febbywerry. This here's a plant—Chiny lily—ye put it in water an' ef ye're goin' to be lucky this year it will bloom for you soon. Them's liche nuts—funny little soft-shell nuts with a dried sweet pulp inside. An' that there"—he pointed to the strange contraption sitting by her door sill—"is a sacred thing th' chinks have to scare away the devils. All sorts o' devils—sickness, loss,

unhappiness. It's feathers an' papers an' sich, with prayers on 'em, ma'am, an' must be on every house's step for luck. Old Ah Sooey Sing wishes you well."

Sandra, looking after the little, old, bent figure padding down towards China Town, felt a quick mist sting her eyes.

"Human," she said, half to herself. "All human—under the skin."

Dan Clehollis was absent from the Rough and Ready once again. He had been gone since noon, and once again none knew his whereabouts. Not even Angel Allie, her small mouth hard and bitter.

It was dark of the moon and cold with snow on all the ridges, and the deer getting tame as tame with the need of forage in the lower hollows. There was venison a-plenty in every mining camp in the Shastas.

At a high gap in the forbidding hills Clehollis sat his horse and held converse with two men who listened avidly to his words.

They were slim riders, these two who sat straight on their lean horses, and beneath their hat brims two pairs of shallow brown eyes glowed and stilled and glowed again with the quick excitement which the speaker stirred in them.

"You say hit's goin' out on th' twenty-fourth," said the older of the two, as if he made certain of

a lesson, "with two men on th' boot. Th' driver armed an' th' messenger a dead-sure shot."

"I do," said Clehollis. "The odds are long, but the express box under that boot will be so heavy with raw gold that it'll take two good men to lift it."

"We're two darned good men, mister," grinned the other.

"It comes from Grim and Rumbler," went on Clehollis. "I saw their books the other day, and one day's entry stood like this."

He fumbled in a pocket of his heavy coat and brought out a block of the thin lucifer matches in use at that time, split off one, scratched it on the block, and, shielding it in his palm, held forth a bit of paper. By the pale light Jard Hasper leaned close and studied the bold figures thereon:

To 855 oz.	13 dwt.	Dust	17.27½	14,781,30
" 1382¼	"	"	"	23,878,30
" 1594¼	"	"	"	27,531,35
" 1308¼	"	"	"	22,595,70

As the light went out the reader caught his breath in a gasp of wonder.

"There will be no passengers on that stage that day," Clehollis said, "but the men who drive her through are the pick of this country—hell-bent for election when it comes to sand and gun-play. It's long odds—for high stakes. I give you the tip—take it or leave it."

For a moment there was silence in the snowy dark.

A branch let go its feathery weight, snapping a little as it sprang erect. Two men toyed with eternity, their excitable and shallow souls flaring under the promise of the danger, the reward.

Presently Jard spoke, stirring in his saddle.

"We take hit," he said. "That's gamblin' right!"

Another week went by. To the players in this deep game of life it was a long one, for varying reasons.

To Sandra, taking her last high fling at the wheel of fortune, it seemed packed full to the brim with sensations, emotions.

On the twenty-third she would take her stone jar for the last time to the express office of Grim and Rumbler, and she wished it to be full. After that, she told herself, she would bid farewell to the games for ever. The wife of Mr. Stanton Halliday must be a different person from that gay blade of adventure who had come to the West to take of its all with a high-and-mighty hand. A person ordered, circumspect, conforming to different standards of life. True, there would be a giving-up, a toning-down, a loss of that rare freedom which she had so deliberately given to herself; but the price, the reward! Oh, heart of her heart, that would be immeasurable!

Never once did the thought strike her that Stan-

ton Halliday had not spoken the vital words, had not asked her to be his wife.

Had they not covenanted together before her poor altar behind the chintz curtain? In her great joy she had never realized that it was she who spoke, who made promises, who dedicated, and that he had been silent.

To the man in question that week was Hades thrice refined.

At his despairing request Mr. and Mrs. Grey had set the wedding forward a full month.

To Lilian it was a time of tremulous uncertainty, of breathless fear lest the delicate balance be lost, lest something happen to bring down the black disaster swinging so lightly in the scales of fate.

To Dan Clehollis it was a satisfaction and a tensing of decisions.

He held a whispered conversation with Pitt Larson, the dealer at the faro lay-out, in which were included the case-keeper and the look-out. Angel Allie saw the conference from afar and cursed under her breath that there was no convenient spot where she might hide and listen. Satan's Sister, looking on with bitter eyes of hatred for all men, knew that someone would pay for Clehollis' interest.

"Cursed traitors!" she told herself savagely. "I wish I could go so far from here that I'd never see a man again on earth!"

For Sandra Dehault that week was to be big with portent.

It started well with her entrance to the Rough and Ready fresh from the cold and the snow outside. The warmth and light of the crowded hall was pleasant. The sight of the gold on the dirty tables, the gay faces of the cards, the reckless players, were as fuel to fire in her, and she gave Jane Hollis unceremoniously to Satan's Sister.

"She is no longer a nameless waif," she said aloud. "I have christened her for that poor father and mother who did not live to do it. Jane Hollis Gephart, Sister, and your very good friend. See! She is keen to come!"

It was true. The little one was reaching out dimpled arms, her small face pink from the cold, and one blue eye visible under the twisted hood brimming with delight. As the dance-hall woman took the innocent creature into hungry arms the look of her painted face was piteous.

Sandra Dehault played late that night with indifferent luck. She, who had been unbelievably lucky, quit the game at evens.

"Oh, well," she laughed, shrugging her broad shoulders, "what would one? The good gambler must lose as cheerfully as he wins, must he not, gentlemen?"

"Game girl!" said the man from Gold Run admiringly. "You have the ear-marks, Miss Dehault."

The girl lost no sleep over the dull play, but

when, the next night, she lost quite heavily a sort of wonder was apparent in her.

And then there set in against her one of those strange tides of disaster as common to the habitual gambler as the proverbial "run of luck" and as unexplainable. As consistently and steadily as she had won before in these heady and enchanted weeks she began to lose. At first the losses were small, but as the fever mounted in her and she began making larger and larger bets they mounted too until a ring of men more dense than usual surrounded the table where she played.

The pale Swede, his face as expressionless as a mask, dealt as carefully and precisely as ever, the cases ran as smoothly. To those experienced and keen-eyed watchers all seemed regular.

But Angel Allie, watching, gripped her folded arms, shifted on her slippered feet.

A flame of cold fire began to flicker in her light blue eyes.

"He's goin' to break her," she told herself unerringly, "like he broke Buck Masters down in Mexico."

Sandra, half bewildered, her face flushed and excited, came back to the game like one obsessed, as indeed she was. The poke swung empty on her wrist these nights as she went home through the starry cold with the child asleep against her breast, wrapped in the voluminous cape, only to be filled afresh from the stone jar on the mantelpiece.

Speculation was rife in Reading's Flat and men were murmuring.

"It don't seem right an' fair, Clehollis," they told the owner of the Rough and Ready, "for th' idol of th' camp to lose her gold like this! Can't you *do* somethin'?"

"Gambling as a profession is built on luck and skill," he told them coldly. "When one deserts a gambler he is apt to lose the other, which last Miss Dehault never had. She's been fortunate, like so many greenhorns at the game. Beginner's luck. The Rough and Ready plays no favourites," he finished, lying, "and it can't begin to now."

Toddle and Waddle stayed in town, vociferous with indignation.

Jason Craig, a silent stander-by at all the life of the camp, was always in the circle of watchers, and his lean, unhandsome face was strained with anxiety. His narrow soul had suffered tortures over this girl's way of life. It suffered anew at this new turn of fate. Always poor in worldly goods himself, he feared poverty for her, saw her fling away her gold with a certain anguish.

"Can't you quit while thar's yet time, Miss Dehault?" he begged her earnestly at her step-stone. "Think of yore children—the future."

But Sandra, thinking of that future with its unspeakable glory, only laughed, shaking her head.

"I've laid out to play till the twenty-fourth," she said, "and to quit that night—for ever. Gold

—it's been a fever in my blood, Jason, a towering flame, a wind and a holocaust. You could not understand. It has been something which I visioned, something which I had to take from life. It has been good—good. Yes," she nodded her black head vigorously, "though it has come across Clehollis' wicked tables it has been good for me, satisfying something in me which has been restless all my life. I think," she finished drolly, "that my delightful ancestor, the Chevalier André Loissen d'Azun de Hault, must have been a great, gay gambler in his day."

CHAPTER XXI

CLEHOLLIS PLAYS HIS HAND

The twenty-fourth of February dawned dark and grey, forbidding.

Low clouds hung between the tops of the ridges, heavy with unshed snow. Beneath this threatening canopy the myriad lights of the mining camp twinkled like dim stars.

It was a sad day, heavy and still, but waiting to crackle at a touch into evil things. The town was full to overflowing, for the miners, who worked gladly in the washing rain, threw down their picks in snow. Every saloon in the place was roaring with life. Satan's Sister played five hours straight for the thumping boots that changed but were never still.

All day Sandra in her cabin was thinking about deep things, happy things, like that home of the future which grew in beauty to her mind with every passing day; grave things, like courage and truth and steadfastness.

Love she scarcely dared to contemplate openly. Its glory was too bright as yet, the full glow not yet tempered by association. The image of Stanton Halliday walked with her everywhere, from hearth to window and back again—a silent

comrade of the soul. In every homely task she saw a forecast of that future wherein every service of her life, heart, mind and body, would belong to him.

The strangeness of her gambling losses gave her a deal of wonderment but little regret. True, she had hoped to take the stone jar's contents to Grim and Rumbler on the day before, that they might be added to the goodly store of her gold that went this morning in the strong-box on the stage. Long before light she had waked and listened to the creak and rumble of the great coach, going by, the thunder of iron-shod hoofs running in the mud, for the horses of the mountain stage lines were splendid fellows, steel thewed and enduring.

There had been nothing to add, she thought, smiling in the dark, for the stone jar held barely enough to stake her for one more enchanted night —give her a last fine snapping of the fingers in the goddess' face.

All day Clehollis was uneasy, something new for him. He had planned many sharp *coups* in his day, carried them out to the bitter end for someone, and had been in no wise disturbed. But this time things were a trifle different.

This woman whom he planned to break was an unknown quantity, a force and a power both in herself and in the influence her lightest word had with the fire-and-tow populace of Reading's Flat.

There was, moving forward with the coming night, a greater element of chance than he had ever handled. One by one he checked over all its angles: Sandra's quick temper, her independence, the sympathy of a thousand woman-hungry men, the look in the blue depths of Angel Allie's eyes.

So the day wore on, with its low skies settling into a denser canopy of grey, which began to sift a slow white smother of snow upon the world. The twinkling lights of the town shone dimly through like fairy candles.

And with the night came Sandra Dehault to the Rough and Ready, her child upon her hip, her buckskin poke swinging on her wrist.

As she laid back her cape's hood and stood in the smoky light she was beautiful as a field of heaven to the half-savage eyes beholding. The white flakes glistened on her garments, sparkled on the soft black curls at her brow. Her cheeks were flaming with their cold caress. She smiled and nodded to the room, and many a man, used to better manners, rose and bowed with stiff and disused courtesy. It had been long since any there had thought of her as anything save the Madonna of the Mines.

"Gentlemen," she said, holding up the little leather bag, "this is my last night at faro. Here is my last stake, my last venture. I am reforming. Do you wish me luck?"

A roar of voices answered with a hundred different thoughts.

"You bet!"

"Th' best!"

"Don't reform, Sandra! We can't spare you!"

"Good, Miss Dehault!"

"Hope you lose—then you can't quit!"

And so on, each after his conception of what her announcement meant to the Rough and Ready.

Men had come for many miles to watch the woman gambler of Reading's Flat, and had stayed to drink in her beauty as one might absorb a play. She had become a pride, an institution. And this was her last night! She had made spectacular use of the fact, a little dramatic fillip which she could no more help than that long-dead cavalier could have helped sweeping his plumed hat to the stones before his executioners. It was in her blood, a harmless preening, a little swashbuckling vanity that must be served.

And she looked like her insouciant ancestor, too, as she stood, caped and booted, drawing off her gloves. She was big as a man almost, built a bit upon his lines, slim of waist and hip, straight of back, like a tall youth, her body falling to splendid planes and beautiful angles.

Sister, taking advantage of Clehollis' indulgence with anything connected with this woman, left her weary playing and came and took the child.

So Sandra Dehault sat down for the last time in

her familiar place. She began her play as usual, with small bets running up as the night progressed, and the ring about the faro lay-out became a mass. Men left their poker chips and cards on their own tables, forsook all other games, that they might look for the last time on the long hands reaching out to place her money, the long eyes, with their curved black lashes, studying the dealer's movements, the lips, red as a damask rose, smiling at her losses.

For the run of ill-luck held. As steadily and ruthlessly as fate, the gold in the poke was drained.

"Don't it beat all!" murmured Texas Tom resignedly. "Just as if th' old dame of chance was down on her an' tryin' to finish her right!"

"Luck's a woman, you know, Texas," said the man from Gold Run. "She's jealous."

"Sure—and so's Angel Allie. See her watchin' Clehollis yonder by th' wall? An' Clehollis is watchin' Miss Dehault. I'm durn glad to-night's her last in this devil's hole."

"You don't understand, boy," returned the other. "Miss Dehault would be safe in hell itself. She's always been safe."

"Well, maybe. But I've got a feelin' inside me somewhere that something's due to happen right smart soon. There's ghosts walkin' hereabouts or I'm a liar."

There were ghosts walking in Reading's Flat, if the grey face of the man coming down the little

path from Sandra's cabin was any sign, for it spoke the language of soul's death. A thin face, lean and gaunt, with deep, dark circles beneath the haggard eyes.

Its owner walked with the swift, tense step of one whose whole being is strung to the last high tension of mental and physical determination. He went unerringly to the Rough and Ready, entering unnoticed by the absorbed mass of men that filled it.

Sandra Dehault raised her poke, shook it at the ring of faces, laughing.

"Gentlemen—my friends!" she cried. "The last throw!" And tossed it, gold and all, upon the king of spades to win.

Silence—breathless waiting—Pitt Larson turning the thin bit of spotted cardboard, slowly, fatefully; a long sigh—the king of spades had lost!

The king of spades had lost. *The black king!*

To the haggard eyes of the man who had pushed through the crowd that small fact leaped out with startling and sinister portent. The girl put both hands on the table's rim and pushed back her chair. She raised her adorable, laughing face.

"*C'est fini!*" she cried; "but it has been glorious! I have done what I set out to do—worked with men—lived among them—played with men, here in a gambling hall of the West—have taken what I chose from life running on this great road—and I have found it good. And, gentlemen," the sweet voice, sliding with its minors, caressed them

all, "I have found you, for the most part—*gentlemen.*"

Ah! she was wise and clever, a player on the strings of hearts!

With that last subtle word the quiet of her hearers deepened.

Then Texas Tom took off his hat and the mass moved, uncovering with a rustle and sigh like a tree that sheds its leaves in an autumn wind.

"I have lost this little—a trifle," she went on, "but I have won more—so much more! I still am rich."

Dan Clehollis alone of all that great roomful had seen the entrance of the newcomer, noticed him threading through the crowd.

Now the gambler, his body suddenly tensing, tossed his chewed cigar away with a flip of his fingers. He, too, moved in to be nearer Sandra where she sat, swinging back and forth on her tilted chair, her hands on the table's edge, holding her small dramatic court. He was a trifle paler than his wont, but his small dark eyes were very bright. Elegant, suave, he stood looking down at her, smiling.

"Yes," he said softly. "You are still rich, my girl."

At the unfamiliar form of address Sandra looked up quickly.

"Eh?" she said.

"You are still rich," he said again, "for you

have lost nothing. The Rough and Ready is yours and all that is in it."

"You are very kind, Mr. Clehollis," she said, "to wish to comfort me; but the loss, as you say, is nothing. Pouf! I do not care. There is still gold to be had for the digging, only that is not so gay and heady a fashion of obtaining it."

"I am in earnest," said the man. "This house is yours—and what it contains."

Sandra sobered.

"This," she said, "is anti-climax. It spoils my farewell to the game!"

"You do not care for the gift?" asked Clehollis.

The mass was still as death, sensing the rising note of drama.

"Please," she said, "excuse me."

"Think, Sandra," went on the gambler, "of—gold—all the gold which the Rough and Ready means."

Flushing, Sandra leaped to her feet.

"Clehollis," she said thinly, "just *what* are you trying to do?"

He waved a fine white hand. There was a ring upon it crusted with small natural nuggets.

"You," he said, "are broke, are you not? The future means very hard work—providing you are sincere in quitting us here. I offer you what you love best—gold. That's all."

The girl picked up her cape from where Texas Tom had laid it on her chair back.

"Thanks," she said, "but I have still my claim

—and I like hard work. Besides, I have quite a little fortune on its way to a bank in San Francisco."

Clehollis smiled.

"Pretty independent, eh?"

"To the last ditch!" cried Sandra. "I am beholden to none—and I will never be!"

"No?" he said.

"No!"

"Ah! that is unfortunate."

"Is it? Why?"

A little white line of anger was beginning to draw in around her nostrils, pinching them.

Clehollis raised his eyebrows, shrugged the shoulders under their smooth black coat.

"Because," he said, "you have never drawn an independent breath in Reading's Flat. Who do you suppose engineered the raising of your cabin at a dollar-twenty-five a day? I did. Whose money bought off Skate Jillson from the likeliest claim on Middle Creek? Mine. And who has packed a gun for the first man in this camp to shine up to you? I have. And the whole country knows it."

Sandra's mouth fell slowly open as the magnitude of his assertion penetrated her consciousness.

"*Sacré bleu!*" she swore suddenly, throwing back her head. "He's a liar! Is he not, gentlemen?"

Her eyes, alive and leaping with mounting wrath, swept round upon those nearest. At what

they encountered there, embarrassment, consternation, she became cold and slow of movement, and the white line drew so deeply in that a sharp, cruel notch set itself in either nostril, changing her face greatly.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she said wonderingly, "is *this* why I have prospered—why I have been safe?"

"Just why," said the gambler. "For everything you have got in Reading's Flat you are in my debt."

For a moment she looked at him, her nostrils fluttering oddly.

Then she flung up a hand, laughed and snapped her fingers.

"Then you're a loser," she said clearly, "and as a good gambler must stand by your loss, for I'll keep what I've got in spite of hell fire and flood! Good night, Clehollis!"

"Not so fast! Sandra—I—think you'll reconsider my—offer when you remember that I go with it. I stand ready at any time to follow it up, even in the light of—ah—shall we say certain drawbacks?"

A gasp went through the crowd. Clehollis' right hand was in the pocket of his coat. His glance, tuned to the last vibration, took note of the grey face under the tilted hat.

"You—what?" said Sandra Dehault thickly.

"I offer you—marriage."

A peal of laughter cut high above the words.

"Marriage!" cried the girl. "With you, Cle-

hollis? I am overwhelmed, *monsieur!* You flatter me! But, unfortunately, I cannot accept—the Rough and Ready notwithstanding—since''—she drew herself up proudly, put one hand on her hip with insolent grace—''since I am already promised in marriage to——''

''Yes?'' said Clehollis, his arm tensing above the right coat pocket, ''to—Mr. Stanton Halliday, of Sacramento?''

''To Mr. Stanton Halliday, of Sacramento,'' she repeated with infinite pride.

''Who,'' snapped the gambler, ''is engaged to be married this coming spring to Miss Lilian Grey, daughter of John Grey, the banker! Let him deny it if he can—and now!''

With the pitiless words, the flinging of his agony broadcast upon the tawdry room, the grey-faced man felt the earth move beneath him for one awful second.

The next he had flung aside those between him and Clehollis, had leaped for him with hands clutching for the throat above the black string tie.

Sandra Dehault felt his body go by her like a wind—saw the gambler's lifted pocket spurt with flame.

There came the sharp crack of a gun and the flying body straightened up, stopped in its stride. The clutching hands flew upward, describing a spectacular arc as the man rose on his toes and curved over backwards.

The girl flung out an arm and caught him as he fell, and her horrified eyes looked straight down into the gently closing eyes of Stanton Halliday!

Across his right temple a clean scarlet streak was beginning to ooze along its edges.

Another second she held him, straining.

Then, like a flash of light, her free right hand made one motion—from belt to chin and out—and a silver streak shot in a wondrous curve that ended at Clehollis' breast. There was a thin *ping* as the fine-hung knife which Todd had made from a file struck, point on, and fell to the floor broken at the hilt.

It had struck square in the centre the huge gold watch which the gambler carried in the left breast pocket of the flowered waistcoat, exactly over the heart.

Then Sandra raised her head and screamed, a high, piercing wail that rang with anguish.

"Jason!" she cried, "Jason, Jason, Jason!"

The crowd parted as Jason Craig, drawn by that cry like the needle to the pole, surged his way through.

And in the midst of that progress another sound struck on the tragic silence, the voice of Sheriff Hayden Shard standing in the wide-flung door with the curtain of the falling snow beyond.

"Boys," he yelled, "here's th' stage! Come draggin' in without a driver! Th' messenger's hangin' on th' boot stone dead—and th' express box is gone!"

CHAPTER XXII

HANDWRITING OF THE SOUL

It was dawn again. Grey dawn, with the snow still falling and all the world lost in its smother.

In the cabin on the town's edge Sandra Dehault leaned above her bed with its patchwork quilts and held her palms hard against the thin cheeks of the man who lay there. The wide eyes under the blood-stained bandage were bright with delirium. Constantly he moved and muttered, fretting in body and spirit.

"Hush!" soothed the woman. "H-u-s-h-h-h! Hush! It is I, Galahad—Sandra. Lie still, please —please—just a little while."

Over her shoulder she looked at those who had come to her in her hour of need—Jason, grey as the sufferer on the bed, Satan's Sister in her scarlet finery, Todd and Waddell, their anxious old faces strained with sympathy. Others had come in the twenty-four hours past, many others, offering everything under heaven that could be offered in the time and place, a string of devotees to the shrine of the door-stone, only to be told that there was nothing to do.

There had been nothing, for Stanton Halliday

had lain in the stupor which precedes death, the travail of his soul forgotten.

Now, with another dawn, the lethargy had given place to sudden raving.

"I think," said Sandra sharply, "that he is worse. Now, Jason, it is time to go. Take the big black with the star in his forehead. He is best, and he can run. Save him in the heavy going, Jason, for he is my friend, but call him out on the levels. House him at Red Bluff when you take the boat. And find Doc Bidwell if you have to rouse the town. Bring him. At all costs *bring him,* without delay."

And so it was that Sandra Dehault stood face to face with Life. Life, the jealous jade who had robbed her, stripped her in one full hour of all that she had taken—gold and freedom and pride, not to mention those bagatelles, unmeasured love and faith. For there had shone in Clehollis' eyes the naked truth what time he picked his quarrel with the man he meant to kill.

Truth—terrible, irrefutable, ugly as sin—but truth!

Sandra had refused to recognize it, to think of it, hanging over Halliday's still form with her heart in her eyes. But an hour back he had stirred and murmured, and the first word on his ashen lips was "Lilian!"

Some part of the girl died then, as swiftly as the failing whisper—something gay and light and

prideful, the sweep of the cavalier's plumed hat, the snapping of fingers.

She shut her lips and swayed over above him for just a fleeting moment, put her hand to her throat.

And now, with the sound of the black's hoofs thundering down the road toward the south, she straightened up and looked at these her friends, the odd old men, the dance-hall woman.

"My dears," she said thickly, "I have something to meet. It is death, I think—a sort of spiritual death—for me—and I would be alone. If—when I need you I'll send Hester——"

"To th' Palace Hotel, ma'am, for us," said Waddell.

"God knows where, for me!" said Satan's Sister passionately. "I'll watch for the kid and be waiting, though."

So Sandra was alone save for the sleeping children and the gaunt man on the bed. She sat down on the little stool on the hearth and folded her hands in her lap, her back to the fire, her face turned toward him.

She sat very straight, the brown merino billowing around her, and tuned her ears to catch each sighing murmur.

She was calm inside, calm as those wide reaches of prairie on whose smiling breast the wind made long running wimples in the buffalo grass. She thought of them. There was in her no disturbance, nothing but vast silence and space it seemed, set

to an exquisite receptiveness. She knew that some time this wide calm would break—with all the winds of eternal night, the awful fires of purgatory ablast against her naked soul—but not now. There would be time for that later—all the time in the world—a whole life of time.

Now there was but this cold waiting for the hand-writing on the wall. She must be very still——

"Your name, girl? Tell me your name?" He was running by her wagon in the street of Sacramento. "I'll settle Buck Lockwell——" The words failed into the usual muttering of a fevered mind. His hands moved constantly. He was as full of movement now as for the night and day he had been still.

Also his lips were working fast, sometimes with words, again with inarticulate murmurings. But a rising unrest was boiling in him. All the awful torment of the past weeks of love and sorrow, of shame and ecstasy and remorse, was reviving in his subconscious mind—without the conscious mind to control it.

Life had dealt hardly with Stanton Halliday.

It had made of him a man of dishonour, had shown him love too late, had put into his unintending hands the power of life and death for three human hearts, and now, at the end when he had come to make confession as best he might, had thrown his poor secret to the sordid winds of a mining camp, laid him, helpless and babbling, at

the feet of the one woman in the whole world for whose sake he would gladly have died.

Poor atom, striving helplessly against the tide of great love, clutching with desperate hands at what there was left of honour.

"Lord God!" he whimpered like a grieving child, "I never meant—— Yes, ten new *aparajos* —bells for the lead mares——"

He was away with his pack trains then, his head moving on the pillow.

But only for a moment. The turmoil would have its way, pushing aside all else.

"Lilian," he said again. "Golden Lily! Little white flower! What have I done to you? The river—dark river—of life—brought you a——" He was silent a long time, and the woman on the hearth leaned tensely forward, her lips open.

The poor mind, bridging its lapses as with the intermittent spark of an electric contact, took up its train.

"Broken heart. I never meant—— Magic cabin—soft with light. *Sandra!* Oh, Lord God! *Sandra! Sandra!*"

The murmur rose to a cry, and the moving hands stretched piteously upward. As if realizing the hopelessness of that tragic appeal, they dropped supinely, and for a moment the man lay still.

The listener scarcely breathed.

"Dishonour—a man—breaks faith with women! I am——"

There was a long silence then, while the fire whispered at its logs and Sandra Dehault wet her lips with a tongue almost as dry.

"I am—a blackguard!" he cried clearly. "Sold my honour for—a woman's love! But God Himself—not—blame—looking on—this woman—this woman—this—this——" The voice trailed off once more to an inarticulate murmur, to rise again in the same desperate cry of *"Sandra! Sandra!"*

Sandra Dehault shut her open lips. She flung up her bent head, shook her shoulders. Under the ashen pallor of her cheeks a fire began to come, faint as the light in the sunrise window. Into the stilled depths of her long, dark eyes there shot a sparkle, a shaft of flame. As instantly as she had picked her place of camp, had sensed the safest crossing of a stream, had known the right thing to do in the crises of the long trail, this girl had suddenly grasped the whole pitiful tragedy of the poor tortured soul of the man she loved.

She knew Clehollis spoke the truth, that there was not a loophole in the net whereby Stanton Halliday could emerge with honour, and she knew, as surely as the sun would shine in spring, that whatever had gone before, that no matter to whom he belonged in the eyes of the world, he belonged to her in heart, and would to the end of time.

Hers!

It mattered nothing that he lay before her broken, that he had played false to her, that he had

lost much of that priceless thing which endears great souls to each other. The very fact that he suffered for his sins absolved him with sweeping grace. It was she whom he loved, helplessly, against his will it seemed, but loved.

That was enough. This man was hers. Well and good.

She had told him once that she would fight for that which she loved to the last ditch—that the giving-up, the sacrificing, was for the good, like Ann Lightfoot, but not for firebrands like herself. And it was so. Already the fighting spirit of her besworded ancestors was rising in her. Lilian Grey and her banker father might figure in the eyes of the world, in hers they sank into insignificance. If Halliday lived—and he would live if she had to give him the very blood from her veins—there was the Reverend Bedial Print who could at least perform a marriage service that would suffice—until such time as one might find an ordained priest. As soon as reason dawned in those blank grey eyes she would take his hand and marry him outright, there on her quilt-covered bed, putting the responses in his lips if necessary. The sooner the better.

The weaker he was the less would he be able to stand against her purpose and the pull of love. So! She would be for him Destiny and Fate, and would back up her judgment with a life of such love as must atone for any high-handedness which seemed to figure in the matter.

Her lips were shut tight upon each other when she rose and bent above him, holding the moving hands. The dawn was lightening in the east. The snow-shrouded world was visible. Spirals of smoke were ascending straight against the green walls of the hills, with their mantles of powdered ermine.

The little ones were waking.

"Hester," said Sandra, "Sandra will be busy all day. You must be a big girl now and help her. There's bread in the box and a little milk left in the jar. Feed your sisters and dress little Jane. And keep them still as still."

The day drew on, a weary time. Strive as she might the girl could not stem the tide of words that flowed from the sick man's lips. Over and over the whole thing moiled in the disordered brain which had laboured so long beneath its load.

The fever in him mounted.

His lips were parched. Sandra milked the drying cow, wading the snow to her brush shelter, and gave it him by spoonfuls.

She put the snow between soft cloths and laid it on wrist and forehead. She soothed him untiringly with hand and voice.

But the endless murmuring went on.

Now it was John Lightfoot to whom he was talking, and again his partner at the mine, and sometimes Mr. Grey, but always he came back to

the cry of "Sandra! Sandra!" and the magic of the lighted cabin. And once he looked earnestly into her eyes and asked her to forgive him, whereat she bent and kissed him fiercely.

She did not count the hours, but she knew vaguely that the grey day was giving place to greyer twilight, and that suddenly there had come a tap upon her door, a timid tap, so light as to be almost inaudible.

She stepped and opened it.

Ah Sooey Sing stood there, bowing, his yellow old hands hidden in his woollen sleeves. And there was another with him, a fat Celestial, bland of face, waiting.

The pidgin English of the early-day Chinaman was bad enough at its best, barely sufficient as a medium between the races and at its best in the younger men. Those who, like Ah Sooey Sing, were not young when they came to the wild land never learned enough to be readily understandable. And so it took a lot of chatter with innumerable gestures to tell the girl that the fat individual was a "Chiny Doctor," and that he had come to do his best for the man stretched yonder on the bed.

But Sandra all but fell on them both as she seized the astonished philterer and dragged him in.

Thus did Ah Sooey Sing remember that day beside the mud-puddle.

And thus did Life take hold of Stanton Halli-

day in the form of a grotesque Chinaman, with his strange dried herbs and evil-smelling brews set steaming on Sandra Dehault's hearth.

Sandra herself, weary to the point of falling, went for a little time into her curtained sanctuary to kneel with her forehead on the simple altar, and laid her down on Hester's bed with a sigh of gladness.

She slept like the dead with her babes curled round and over her, and waked in another dawn to find Stanton Haliday still at last, the fever gone and his lean face white as the snow without.

Ah Sooey Sing sat by the wall, his hands in his sleeves, a statue with unblinking eyes, while the man of medicine stood close by Halliday and watched him, every breath.

Sandra, springing up with sudden new fear, bent down above him. Faint indeed was that even breath, faint as a babe's new born.

"Oh," she whispered on an indrawn gasp. "Oh, Galahad!"

"Him dlie," said the fat Celestial blandly, "plitty soon."

With a savage motion Sandra Dehault flung back the quilts and raised Halliday's body up against her breast. She crouched beside him, covering him with her arms, her breast, the warm expanse of her bare throat. She strained him to her, holding him with all the strength of her work-hard arms, yearning her very life and vital-

ity into him, praying with every beat of that slow heart.

The moments dragged by and seemed like years to her.

The light in the sunrise window was red as blood and yellow as gold, for the snow-clouds had vanished. It was a new day, fair and clear.

"Not like this, Galahad," she whispered in his unheeding ear, "we'll never part like this!"

There was a coldness in his flesh, a dampness on his face that chilled her to the heart but would not loose her grasp of him, or let go for one second the straining of his inert form to hers.

The sun came up in majesty, smiling on the sparkling world, the bedecked conifers, the road that ran, a faint trace under the snow, to Oregon.

That Great Road on which travelled all humanity and every thing pertaining to it—gold and freedom and love and—sacrifice.

Another space of uncounted time, and the doctor put a long-nailed yellow hand on Halliday's heart—his wrist——

"H'm!" he said non-committally.

Sandra did not look up or move.

It was noon, with the sun high overhead, when he again put out the yellow hand.

"Good," he said, "him walm—him live."

Thirty hours later a light wagon drawn by four steaming horses pulled wearily out of the trace

toward the lighted windows of the cabin at the edge of town.

Jason Craig drew the black horse up beside the vehicle.

"Yon," he said, "is the house."

Then he took the good horse which had made so monstrous a journey for its mistress' sake on to his cabin, where he could care for it, and where he, too, after a monstrous journey for a woman's sake, could fling himself to the oblivion of sleep. Thus it was that Sandra Dehault, flinging back her door to Doctor Bidwell, found on her sill three others.

In the fine, forceful figure, with its pill-bags in its mittened hands, she scarcely recognized the drunken doctor of the wagon train. She knew at once with a shrill of gladness John Lightfoot at his shoulder, but the burly man wrapped in rich furs, with a woman similarly protected on his arm, was a stranger.

Wondering for a blank second, she stepped back and waved them in. Mr. Lightfoot shook her hand with earnest kindliness, the doctor set down his bags and bowed, but the big man in the furs did not even look at her.

They laid aside their ponderous wraps, and then it was that a fiery sword struck to Sandra's heart, for the woman proved to be a girl, a small, slim, wisp of a girl whose golden head shone fair in the light—and she heard the big man call her Lilian.

So! Kismet!

The actors were assembled, the stage was set, and her enemies were formed against her!

For one awful second the room and its figures wavered in eccentric arcs, what with the rage that filled her.

Here—in her own house! After the anguished hours of the terrible battle she had fought for the fluttering life beyond. Oh, it was unspeakable, and for that swift, wild moment there was stark murder in her heart.

Then she heard a cry like a child's wail at night, and the fair-headed girl had run forward and dropped on her knees beside the bed, her arms outstretched across the still figure there.

"Stanton!" she cried despairingly. "Stanton! Oh, Stanton!" With one great leap Sandra Dehault was across the room. She caught the fragile thing and flung her, literally and savagely, back against her father.

Standing like a lioness before her young, her nostrils shaking in and out, her eyes flaming red and green exactly like those of a wild cat in the dark, she faced them all.

Behind her, a cohort as it were pressed into the corners, there stood those she called her friends, negligible in the eyes of the world, proved by that lowly brotherhood of service which binds the heart—Satan's Sister with the little ones gathered at her knees, Todd and Waddell balanc-

ing belligerently on their joint underpinning, and the wrinkled old Chinaman, Ah Sooey Sing.

"To what," said Sandra thinly, "do I owe this unwarranted intrusion? You, Doctor Bidwell, I sent for. And you, Captain Lightfoot, I am more than glad to welcome. You are his friend. *But you——?*"

There was in the voice, thinned to a whining blade, all the cold contempt of a French noble for the *bourgeoisie.*

Mr. John Grey, a man of wealth and importance, used to deference, worn to the edge by these weeks of watching his daughter decline before his eyes, and facing now the cause, as he believed, of that decline, was enraged beyond control. Also the sight of that savage hand on the child's shoulder, the contemptuous handling of her person, choked him with wrath. If Sandra had been a man he would have tried his best to kill her.

"Woman," he said, "stand aside! You, with your low brawls, your harlot's lure, have done enough to Mr. Halliday! Stand back!"

"Stranger," cut in the mild voice of Todd, "you eat that word! Eat it quick!"

His right hand was outstretched, moving up and down. On its horny palm a long knife balanced, hilt out. The banker did not heed.

"Shoot, Todd!" rasped Satan's Sister. "Nail the toad!"

"You——" said John Grey.

"*Whine!*" sang the thin blade like a viper.

Next instant it hung, handle down, in the lobe of the speaker's right ear, a grotesque ornament.

Now indeed he turned stunned eyes toward the ridiculous pair in the corner. A flip and a hop, and another knife lay balancing on that expert palm.

"Eat it?" said Mr. Todd, his mild old eyes roused and fiery.

"I do," said John Grey promptly.

"We calls this lady, our blessed Sandry here, th' Madonner of th' Mines, an' there ain't nobody nigh enough to spit on what's fit to lace her shoes, no fat-paunched blaggard from Sacerment notwithstandin'," said Mr. Todd, making the speech of his life.

Doctor Bidwell took the knife from the banker's ear, staunching the blood with his kerchief. In the midst of the operation a certain drag and pull drew the father's glance down to the limp form on his arm, an exclamation from his lips.

Very quietly the girl had fainted.

In the activity that now took place Sandra Dehault stood like a stranger in her own house. She saw Doctor Bidwell lay the exquisite small form upon the floor. Saw the firelight play on the golden head. She saw the transparent whiteness of the young face, the deep blue circles under the closed eyes, the cheeks that hung in against the structure of bone beneath. There was little left to The Golden Lily's beauty. Grief had sapped it to the bottom.

Doctor Bidwell, hiding his own heart, had come to do his best for the man whom this girl loved, but it was not in human nature to think of him while he could minister to her. Therefore he deliberately brought her round and laid her, pale and death-like, on the other bed against the wall. When he had covered her with Sandra's quilts, seen that she was getting warm again, he walked over and looked down upon the unconscious face of Stanton Halliday.

An hour passed with the doctor's skilled hands feeling for the spark of life—at pulse—heart—eyelid—and trickling drops between the open lips.

None of the watchers more than moved.

The flame of almost unbearable wrath was still burning in Sandra's set face, her arms were folded tight across her breast.

At the end of the hour Doctor Bidwell straightened up.

"He has brain fever," he said quietly, "superinduced by the stroke of the bullet which very nearly fractured the skull, and aided by some strain of the spirit, I should say. Not the wound alone would have so wasted him in this short time. It will be a long fight."

"Then we'll take him home at once—start early," said John Grey. "The wagon has good springs and we can get fresh horses. The boat is comfortable and we'll spare no expense for comfort."

That was like him. All his life this man had gone straight to the point, driving to success.

Sandra Dehault laughed suddenly, her head flung sidewise in a savage gesture.

"Mr. Lightfoot," she said, "take that man out of my house—at once. There is a hotel in the camp beyond."

Mr. Grey stood still.

"A good hotel, th' Palace," said Todd from his corner.

"The girl?" asked John Lightfoot, embarrassed.

Sandra's flaming eyes went to the frail thing lying so still in the second bed.

"Can stay," she said; "but I would be alone."

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEREIN A GREAT HEART FINDS ITSELF

Night once more. The fire on the hearth flickering. A cold wind blowing over the snow without —and Sandra Dehault sitting on her little stool.

The cabin was empty save for the two inert figures that slept, oblivious of the human storm that filled one woman's breast, and for Doctor Bidwell, sitting on the far side of the fire.

Satan's Sister, escorted by Todd and Waddell, had taken the babes to the Palace Hotel.

It was two of the clock and there had been no word passed between these two watchers. From time to time the man rose and looked at the sleepers, came and sat down again.

Sandra's elbow was on her knee, cupped in a palm. The other hand was beneath her chin, that strong chin below the dimples of her laughter. She had been through Hades thrice refined, but there was in her no visible trace of it. Such was the great strength of her, body and mind and heart.

Her long eyes were fastened, unblinking, on the fire.

She was attending the theatre of Life.

For five consecutive hours she had sat so, mov-

ing only to change her chin from one hand to the other, to stir upon her stool.

She had travelled once again the long trails of the Crossing; had met the sunrise and the noons, the twilights and the starry nights; had felt once more their thrill and promise. She had taken Hester from her mother's grave, had laughed in the faces of women who hated her on sight. She had felt the joy of arrival in the virgin land, had been in the stores at Sacramento, had looked down on the upturned face of a man who leaped beside her wagon crying for her name. She had gloried in the great road that ran to Oregon, on which passed the whole of life; she had taken from its flowing tide all that she had visioned of wealth and home and happiness, of work and adventure. She had waited the long weeks for the Rider—and he had come, tapping at her door. And she had taken love, love so great that it had been the shining gem set on the peaks of preparation. Yes, she had been strong, strong to take what she desired, a free figure of life, working against odds and winning. Yes, she had won.

All that she had visioned in those far days of the start had come to her steadily, marching on the Road.

It was all here with her now.

She had but to be herself, to hew to her line as she had always done, braving all odds, daring the future, and it was hers for ever. These people—these passing flaws upon her plan—she could

ride them down as she had ridden down all other obstacles. The future would be long, and he would forget. She, with her capacity for love, would make this as if it had not been.

She would——

The girl in the shadows moved and moaned.

The doctor rose, looked at her, and once more sat down.

Sandra did not look at him.

She would——

"Miss Dehault," said Doctor Bidwell softly.

"Sir?"

She turned her head and met his eyes, cavernous, earnest, sad with an odd unrest. They were the eyes of a soul that has greatly sinned and has not yet fulfilled its atonement.

"At this hour of night all life is lowest," he said in a tone so soft as to scarce disturb the silence. "The soul is tied to the body with the lightest, loosest thread. When I have a very sick patient I am always alert in the still hours after midnight, for it is then that earth's grasp of its heavenly tribe is very weak. Perhaps it is because the sun, that revivifying agent, is farthest away from us——"

"You mean," said Sandra sharply, "that he is in more danger?"

"Not just exactly, though he is a very sick man. Rather I was speaking from and to the spirit, the spirit that seems in these silent passes to be more nearly a-wing toward that realm from whence

it came. If we are less of earth it must follow that we are nearer heaven, must it not?"

"Yes," said Sandra simply.

"Nearer that Omnipotent Being who, we are told, is love itself. Love, that strange and mighty force which can work such astounding changes in the human soul. Love that can redeem and purify, that can drag down and dishonour, that can give life and take it. You knew me, Miss Dehault, when —God forgive me—I was a vagabond and worse. When I besottedly so forsook my duty as to let human lives go out that I might have saved—lives with all their promise, their obligations. The sight of your three orphaned babes went into me to-night like a white-hot iron. Love—the Christian love of John Lightfoot and Ann, their strong touch on my spiritual shoulder—has lifted me bodily from the mire. That and—love in my barren heart for—a—girl. A girl who cried out to me once when temptation had me by the throat, and for whose sake I would walk through fire. For whose sake I am doing so. . . . Do you not understand, Miss Dehault?"

Sandra passed her hand across her lips, along her cheek, brushed the hair back from her temple, shook her head.

"The Golden Lily," said Doctor Bidwell simply, "is dying, as surely as the sun shines. Dying of that malady for which we have no philtre, a broken heart. For weeks I have watched her decline, helpless, when I would give my life to see

the roses bloom on her wasted cheeks again, to see the light of happiness in her innocent eyes."

With the last word Sandra Dehault leaped to her feet, one hand clenched at her breast.

"What are you trying to do?" she said tensely. "Why do you tell me this?"

There was no flicker in the deep eyes of the man across the hearth.

"It is well that you should know," he said, "for in your hands lies the power of destiny, to make or mar. I know that. I know, too, the strength that is in you, the magnificent strength which makes of you the super-woman that you are. I have one more word to say, then I shall be silent. When Stanton Halliday made his first trip north among the mines he was newly engaged to Lilian Grey, and they were happy. Look at them now."

The girl, standing at bay against the mantlepiece, flashed a glance toward the shadowed wall.

"I wish to hear no more," she said coldly. "I am neither good nor gentle. I am stone and steel to-night. Let be."

Doctor Bidwell nodded.

"So be it," he said gently.

Sandra sank once more upon her little stool, dropped her chin in her palm and fixed her eyes on the fire, which from time to time the doctor had replenished.

She shook herself mentally and resumed her train of thought broken by this interruption. Where had she been? Yes—the long future, with

its gold of love like nothing in the earth, nor the heavens. Their future—hers and Galahad's. She scorned to think of him as Stanton since that cry of Lilian Grey's.

She had never done so, anyway.

She would make him forget—— Here there was a sudden stop in the hurrying train, as if an obstacle barred its progress. Forget—forget—the dead face of a girl. The small, fragile, innocent face, with the deep blue rings beneath the eyes, the cheeks sunken on their bones. Did a man ever forget such? She shook herself petulantly, struck the billows of the brown merino back from her feet with an impatient hand.

She wished she had not sent for Doctor Bidwell!

There would be the wide fields with the running horses, the log house with its deep rooms cool and shadowy, the harpsichord at night——

Love like theirs, great, God-like——

Once more the shock and jar, the hindrance of opposing thought.

God-like?

She moistened her lips and found them strangely dry.

She frowned and stirred upon her stool.

A dead girl—a dead girl's face floating on the pool of memory.

Love? Won on the sorry field of a dead girl's broken heart.

But would she die? Did people die from thwarted love? Sandra had heard of such—and

one who loved Stanton Halliday, with his deep-grey eyes, his mouth curved upwards at the corners!

A pain so deep, so terrible, so poignant in intensity, struck to her heart that she instinctively put a hand upon her breast. What would the loss of him mean to her?

Ah, she knew—knew suddenly, as if with blinding light in dark places, that this loss would indeed be death! Death to her heart and soul, to light and life and laughter, to all that made the glory of the earth.

To that frail creature yonder it might well be literal death as well. Bah! she hated such weaklings, creeping on the road of life. And yet—"he had been hers and they were happy."

So! There were two women here and one man. The age-old triangle.

One of these women was weak, and one was strong. The man lying helpless between them was a pawn in battle.

He belonged, in every fibre of his heart, to her.

He had come to her to pour out his confession, to her who was strong, who would understand, who would forgive.

He had all but given his life for this love of theirs—stolen from the pale girl yonder to whom it rightfully belonged.

The long hand gripping her elbow tightened its clasp.

Which of the two would survive his loss?

She, Sandra Dehault, her labouring heart told her sternly.

Who could sacrifice and endure?

She, the firebrand.

What was it she had said to Halliday one enchanted night, sitting here upon the hearth, about the Great Road running north?

That it carried all of life upon its breast—gold and work and happiness. "All?" he had asked strangely. "Does it carry sorrow, too—and pain—and abnegation, Sandra?" Her name on his lips the first sweet time! And what had she answered? "Yes—all—everything. How could it be life unless it did? It is the road of the soul as well as the body, Galahad, and it is a gallant road. Oh, a gallant, gallant road!"

Thus she had spoken.

"Giving up, sacrifice," she had said, "those must come to some hearts, God pity them! But they were part of that road of life, the things which made its splendour."

She was leaning forward now, the broad shoulders drawn together as if under the blows of a leaded lash.

Her eyes were narrow between their dusky lashes, mere slits of light burning back with the hearth-fire's flame.

Who was she?

A de Hault, blood kin to that Chevalier André Loissen d'Azun de Hault who had played high

with life and died for his king with a laugh upon his lips—so said the traditions of her house.

A daughter of the father who had faced the odds of life with a gallant front, who had taught her his code of honour, the simple code of lifted head, eyes fore and weapon ready.

And—last stern guide-post on this splendid road—the woman whom Stanton Halliday loved with all his heart!

She was biting the nails of the hand beneath her chin now, bent far over, but her face was still towards the light.

She was—she was—his woman, his ideal. She would be—would be—for ever she must be—that—and nothing less.

When the dark head went down into the cupped palms of both hands Doctor Bidwell rose and went silently from the room.

It was dawn again, faintly grey above the snow-clad hills.

It seemed as if all bitter things came with the dawn to Sandra Dehault, who stood upon her stone step and held the hand of John Lightfoot in a tight clasp. The warm, unspoken sympathy in this good man's heart had been as a rock in the sea of agony to her this past awful hour.

The good wagon was ready with its piteous load, fresh horses stamped in the cold, and she knew that under the canvas cover the dim face of

Lilian Grey brooded beside the man who was destiny to them both.

The stern banker had given her neither word nor look.

Doctor Bidwell rode on the seat where Mr. Lightfoot would soon take rein as driver.

But now, with her empty cabin behind her and the dawn coming faintly red in the sunrise window, she searched the honest face of the ex-captain. She laid her free hand over his, looked deep into his eyes.

"Tell him some day, Mr. Lightfoot," she said earnestly, "that a man's honour lies with his given word—and that a woman's does too. Don't forget, sir, please, that last—a woman's too."

She was thinking of the covenant before the simple altar wherein she had pledged her love, her life, for ever. The covenant in which but one voice had been audible—*her own.*

Then the wagon was tilting down the faint trace of a road beneath the snow, the road which ran now to the south.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE COVENANT FULFILLED

Spring came running with beautiful feet along the valleys where the dog-tooth violets grew and the poplars made a fringe of golden green for the new skirts of the hills.

It set the bold blood of the pioneers stirring with its fret, laid open the fresh heart of the new land to their coming.

And they were heading north.

In that spring of 1852 an immense throng poured up along the unknown way that led up the Sacramento river, through Shasta Valley, where Reading's Flat lay nestled, across the Klamath, over the Siskiyou range, into the Oregon country —literally the Oregon Trail. These were the lovers of the land who moved this year, the men who carried ploughs and seed, who brought their wives and children. They followed in the wake of the gold diggers, widened the dim traces of their intrepid lead. They, too, were makers of history, these breeders of a hardy type, these rugged visionaries.

Every day a stream of swaying wagons rocked through Reading's Flat; men hailed men they had never seen before, would never see again, and

the faces of women peering from the schooners' sides became a common sight.

Homes were moving on the wilderness. The virgin land, so long waiting for her bridegroom, man, decked herself in glory.

On every hill the conifers sang their soft-voiced diapason, snow-waters leaped and birled. Strange red lilies bloomed, while rhododendrons and wild azaleas leaned on the breast of every passing wind like gorgeous voluptuaries.

And on a day that seemed made for happiness, so sweet with sun and wind was it, two things of deep portent took place.

In the Grey mansion at Sacramento a wedding was solemnized in the presence of a few close friends, John and Ann Lightfoot, Doctor Bidwell, the Richards; and out of Reading's Flat a certain wagon once more took the trail.

It was in good order, its great wheels snug in felly and tyre, its hub new-tarred from the pail that swung beneath, its cover stretched tight upon its bows. Much of this work had been done by the quiet man whose sombre eyes were sick with longing, with dreams that were to be for ever unfulfilled.

As the wagon drew down into the road this man stood on the step of the little cabin at the town's edge, watching.

He looked at the trim outfit, the four black horses, not so fit as they might have been after the lean winter, the cow, precious in the time and

place, strained his vision for one more sight of the face that rimmed the world for him.

As the lead team turned north Sandra Dehault leaned out from her seat and looked back at him, standing so lone upon her deserted sill. She raised her hand in the solemn salute of undying friendship, held it so a moment, and turned her face away.

Jason Craig went in and shut the door, turned, and sinking down upon his knees, laid his face against the crude bar in its slot, the bar her hands had touched in their arrogant pride, in happiness, and lastly in great sorrow.

In the middle of the street the wagon stopped.

There were many in Reading's Flat to whom this girl must bid good-bye, Sheriff Hayden Shard and the kindly man from Gold Run, Texas Tom, and many others. And there were those she counted friends—Satan's Sister, Todd and Waddell.

They came to her from all quarters, wishing her luck, genuinely sorry to see her go, for she had been a pride, an institution, reaching up to shake her hand as if she were a man.

She was so busy with all this that she did not see at first the odd cortège that came round the corner of the blacksmith shop and paused at the pine porch of the Rough and Ready, nor note the woman dressed in modest garments, shawled and bonneted, who spoke a moment with its personnel.

When she raised her eyes at last, grave eyes without the shadow of a smile in them, deep eyes burned dry with grief, she stared, uncomprehending, for a moment.

For the woman in the quiet clothes was Satan's Sister, and the queer cortège consisted of two good pack-mules piled to high heaven with a choice assortment of picks and pans, of pots and kettles, and the two odd figures sitting with martial uprightness on two very good horses were none other than Toddle and Waddle, Inc.!

"My dears, my dears!" said Sandra Dehault wonderingly, "what's this?"

Satan's Sister came down the steps of the gambling hall, a bright carpet bag dragging heavily in her hands.

Waddell took off his ancient hat with a flourish.

"It means, ma'am," he said firmly, "that me an' Todd's decided that this here men's camp has got too darned civilized to suit our tastes. It's a cryin' shame how things is gettin' crowded. A feller can't spit no more 'thout din' it in someone's backyard. An' so we're headin' north with you. Sister too," he finished as the woman with the haggard, handsome face reached the schooner's wheel.

Astounded, Sandra looked down at her.

"You want to go—with me?" she asked gently.

"If you'll take me," said the other simply. "I have saved some gold, and I can work. I'll go straight, so help me God!"

Without another word Sandra held down her hand and the woman came up beside her.

Texas Tom, who had leaped to lift the heavy bag, now offered it.

"If that's—the gold—you have saved, Sister," she said, "just let Tom throw it back to the Rough and Ready. We don't want it, do we?"

She looked deep in the other's eyes and Sister nodded.

Texas Tom flung the bag back on the pine porch just as Dan Clehollis, elegant, neat in his long black coat, his thumbs in his armpits came out from within.

"So," he said, smiling, "we turn lily white? I could hold it against you, Miss Dehault, for taking Sister from me, but, seeing that I shall some day follow, we'll let it pass. I give you a year, Sandra. After a year of hardship in Oregon, I figure you'll be glad to see Clehollis and—his gold. Time is the great healer, and don't forget for one moment my promise. Dan Clehollis always—gets—what he—goes after. I promise—"

What he was to promise further none would ever know, for it was never finished.

Just inside the dance-hall Angel Allie narrowed the gold-fringed lids across her childish blue eyes. She raised the small hand hidden in her gaudy skirt.

"Not Oregon for you—but death!" she said, and shot him where he stood.

A little later Sandra Dehault picked up her reins, kicked loose her brake. The black horses leaned in their collars, the schooner creaked to the start.

It was well under way when something running grotesquely at her wheel caught her attention, a thin, bent figure clad in black silesia, its grizzled pigtail flying, its bundle bobbing on the stick across its shoulder. Slowing, she looked down into the pleading, unfathomable eyes of Ah Sooey Sing, blue and smoky above their opaque blackness, like the dim eyes of a very old dog.

So it was that Sandra Dehault set out again upon the road, that Great Road which had meant so much to her, with its gold and its adventure, its land and life and love, from all of which she had come to take high-handedly.

And she had taken home and work and happiness, laughing in her pride—had taken love—oh, love so great that its glory was unbearable!—and she had lost them all.

The vanished gold, the dear small cabin with its windows, to the east to watch the sunrise, to the west to see the sun go down, the joy and pride and arrogance—these lost things she was not conscious of. Only a man's face—a lean face with deep grey eyes that had once held a little light of laughter in them—the lips curved up at the corners—the kindly heart beneath. These rode always with her in anguish, would ride to the end of life.

She sat straight on her high seat, her booted feet firm on dash and brake, her hands deft with the double lines, and drove away toward a yet newer land, and she was poor in this world's goods. So poor that the wagon held them all, and yet in her dull heart she was dimly conscious of a certain wealth, the wealth of friendship proven, the adoring love of humble hearts—for had she not still her babes to work for? Was not the redemption of a woman's soul and body something very precious? And did not that intrepid and war-like pair, Todd and Waddell, bring grandly up the rear, while Ah Sooey Sing's long queue with its inbraided strings of bright cloth waved gaily on the winds at the wagon's tail?

For the first time in all the bitter weeks tears came to her weary eyes, and, brimming full, dripped for a little time upon the bosom of the scarlet shirt. But presently she wiped them away with the back of her free hand, and a faint glimmer of a smile came there instead.

Ah, well, it was the Road again—the Splendid Road—the grand highway of the body and the soul.

It led to Oregon—to life and—work.

Painfully her consciousness omitted "love."

She raised her head again, flung back her shoulders, faced front, very much as that long-dead Cavalier might have done what time he swept his plumed hat to the stones and stepped forth—for his king.

Three years had come and gone. It was spring once more in the great Coast Country.

Once more the snows had gone from all the verdant slopes, resting in whiteness on the peaks alone to feed the leaping streams. Once more the dog-tooth violets, the lilies and the rhododendrons bloomed. The trace across the Siskiyous was a good road now, for many wheels had worn it.

Great changes had come to the wild land.

Here and there, in this valley and that, the smoke of hearth-fires rose. Fields grew deep with grain. Young fruit trees, sprung from seeds brought with the wagon trains, were growing with astonishing vigor, a forecast of that later day when the orchards of this West would lead the world.

The mines had swept forward to so wild a prosperity that men could not compute the riches of these rugged hills.

Camps were everywhere, on every bar and creek, in every gulch—wild, roaring, hectic spots answering to every conceivable name—Henpeck, Graveyard, Lynchburg, rough and roistering and literally spilling with gold. Flumes and ditches had sprung into existence. Hydraulic power was in evidence at famous Cherokee Flat. The hum and thunder of stamp mills was beginning to shake the brooding silence of the wilderness.

Never before in the history of the world had there been such a country, never would there be again.

A young land, fecund, smiling, beautiful—a princess clad in royal robes, bedecked with priceless gems.

Late on a day in June a traveller sat resting on his tired horse where the Oregon Trail dipped down to the great flat valley of the Rogue. The sun was going down behind the western hills, sending the nameless colours of magnificence falling on the world in a million miles of haze. To north and west, to south and east, mountains stood against a turquoise sky, rimming a monstrous basin as level as a floor. To the south-east the silver shoulders of McLaughlin's Peak rose stark into the heavens, pink as a rose against the blue. All over the level basin long wisps and banners of the marvellous mauve-rose haze drew here and there, beggaring description in beauty, stilling the soul of the beholder with ineffable peace.

Far across the wide expanse there shone the winding reaches of Rogue River.

To the left, a tiny dot on the floor, the rider could see the block-house and stockade of what he knew to be Fort Jackson in southern Oregon.

And, nearer than all else, lying close to the valley's southern edge, there stood out in the glowing light the cluster of a homestead.

There was the cabin, square and solid, none so big as it might have been, but snug with the seeming of safety in a wild land and sweet with its spiral of smoke. There was a log barn standing a

bit apart, a shed or two, the rope and wheel and curb above a well. On the flat beyond some horses gazed contentedly and he saw with a strange thrill that they were black. Four or five head of cattle were there, too.

Beyond all this there lay the pleasant stretches of cultivated fields, a bright green strip of garden.

Long the rider on the tired horse sat still and gazed upon it. The grey eyes under his tilted hat-brim were grave and steady, the eyes of one who has looked life in the face.

Now they were filled with the look of the traveller in far places who beholds the lights of home. The lips, with their tender, up-turned corners, trembled suddenly, and he bent and laid them to the fair head of the year-old child which he carried on his saddle-bow.

An hour later he came to another door with another stone at sill, looked down into the face of the woman who appeared there, drawn by his horse's shuffling step.

A tall woman, beautiful as few are beautiful, dark-eyed, dark-haired, whose hand flew to her throat helplessly, whose red lips fell apart and who stared at him as we stare at those whom we have mourned as dead.

"Galahad!" said Sandra Dehault, scarce above a whisper. "Oh, Galahad!" and swayed in her doorway, so that another woman sprang to put swift arms around her. There was a hop and

shuffle from within, the pad of old feet in flapping slippers, the stir of children frightened.

But the woman put all these by, and, shaking her black head as if to clear her vision, came to him with upreaching arms.

"Three years, Sandra," said Stanton Halliday, "three years of atonement. To the last beat of my heart, the last fibre of my body, I atoned. It would have been to the last breath of my life, but that death willed it otherwise. I was blessed beyond my deserts, for I made her happy. Now there are but we two left. I bring you another Unnamed. Can you—can you—take——"

He stopped, swallowing at the lump which choked him.

For answer Sandra Dehault drew into one arm, warm with universal love, universal motherhood, the weary babe with The Golden Lily's lovely face, reached the other upward to circle the man's bowed head.

"For ever, beloved," she said, like an echo of that covenant which gave her life to him, and kissed him softly on the cheek as she had done that long-past day in the street of Sacramento.

"For ever—and—for ever."

The End.

Mrs. Leon Young